FALKLAND ROAD

PROSTITUTES OF BOMBAY

BY

MARY ELLEN MARK

SHOUT
SHARE
IT

PHOTOGRAPHS AND TEXT BY

MARY ELLEN MARK

The street is lined with old wooden buildings, cage-like structures on the ground floor . . . with girls everywhere: on steps, behind the bars of windows, 11-year-old girls to 65-year-old ex-madams. The street is like any busy lower-class street in Bombay . . . vendors, merchants, shops everywhere. From sunrise to sunset customers survey the cage girls. . . .

Bombay's Falkland Road—the internationally notorious street of prostitutes, whose daily life is here revealed in an astonishing collection of photographs. Beautiful 17-year-old Asha, who dreams of being a servant, but is afraid no one will hire her . . . a corpulent madam dressed in glittering reds and oranges, surrounded by her girls and looking like an ancient idol . . . 3-year-old Mari, playing in the small cramped room where his mother and his many "aunts" live and work . . . and Munni, 15 years old, once a beggar: "The name tattooed on my arm is the only thing I can bring with me to my death."

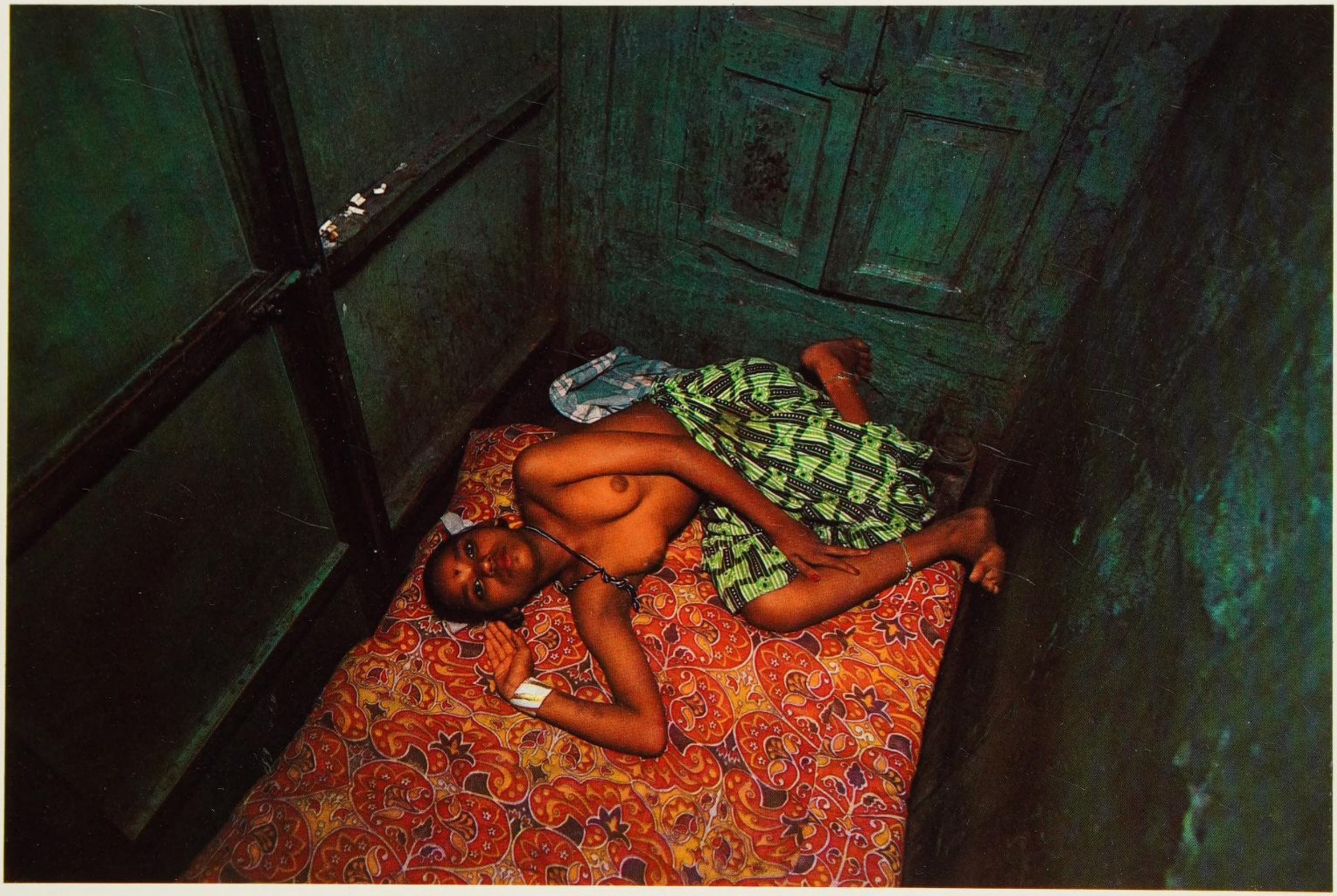
Over the course of the last ten years, Mary Ellen Mark's travels to India provoked a deepening determination to create this book—to take these striking, intimate photographs. Through her own intense involvement, she has captured the variety of individual life and colour that exists amongst the squalor. The result is an electric and unforgettable portrait of the raw world that is Falkland Road.

Also by Mary Ellen Mark

Ward 81

Passport

FALKLAND ROAD



FALKLAND ROAD

PHOTOGRAPHS AND TEXT BY

MARY ELLEN MARK

THAMES AND HUDSON

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Like most countries, India has fancy brothels and expensive call girls. But the pictures in this book were taken on a street in Bombay where the less expensive prostitutes live and work, an area famous for the cage-like houses in which some of the women live.

These photographs were taken between October 1978 and January 1979. During that time I got to know and enter the world of some of the women on Falkland Road. They were very special women. This book is for them—with deep thanks to my friend Saroja.

Acknowledgments

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INTRODUCTION

I thought about Falkland Road for ten years. I had gone there in 1968 on my first trip to India. I went back on each of my succeeding trips.

Falkland Road is lined with old wooden buildings. On the ground floor there are cage-like structures with girls inside them. Above these cages the buildings rise three or four stories, and at every window there are more girls—combing their hair, sitting in clusters on the windowsills, beckoning to potential customers. They vary in age from eleven-year-old prostitutes to sixty-five-year-old ex-madams.

At the same time it is like any other busy lower-class street in Bombay. All day long there are enormous traffic jams, with horns constantly honking, hundreds of taxicabs, and unwieldy two-story buses. Vendors sell brassieres, fountain pens, magazines, and medicines. Water-carriers haul goatskins filled with water into the houses, unloading them from a huge tank truck parked on the street. And always in front of the three movie houses there are long queues of men waiting for the next show to start. (Movies are an important part of Indian life.)

And then there are the customers walking up and down the street, surveying the girls. The customers range in age from thirteen to seventy-five. Some are handsome and some grotesque. They are lower-middle- or lower-class Indians—the area is too poor to attract foreigners, though once in a while some Arabs come by in long white robes. (Arabs are considered very important because they have money and will sometimes even rent a girl for a few days.) The cage girls do everything to attract the men: they beckon and shout and grab at them; sometimes they pull up their skirts and make obscene gestures.

For ten years I tried to take photographs on Falkland Road and each time met with hostility and aggression. The women threw garbage and water and pinched me. Crowds

of men would gather around me. Once a pickpocket took my address book; another time I was hit in the face by a drunken man. Needless to say, I never managed to take very good photographs.

In October of 1978 I decided to return to Bombay and try somehow to enter the world of these women and to photograph them. I had no idea if I could do this. But I knew I had to try. The night before I left I had a vivid dream: I was a voyeur hiding behind a bed in a brothel on Falkland Road watching three transvestite prostitutes making love. I awoke amused and somewhat reassured. Perhaps my dream was a good sign.

Once in Bombay, I started out by just going to the street. It was the same as always —crowds of men around me and the women alternately hurling insults and garbage at me. Every day I had to brace myself, as though I were about to jump into freezing water. But once I was there, pacing up and down the street, I was overwhelmed, caught up in the high energy and emotion of the quarter. And as the days passed and people saw my persistence, they began to get curious. Some of the women thought I was crazy, but a few were surprised by my interest in and acceptance of them. And slowly, very slowly, I began to make friends.

My initial friends were the street prostitutes, who were the first to approach me because they are the most free and least inhibited. That is why they are on the streets and not inside a brothel—they are too independent to accept the restrictions imposed by a madam. When they find a customer, they take him into a cage or to a bed in a brothel room rented out by a madam in return for half their fee. Some madams will also allow them to wash and change inside their house. At night these prostitutes sleep out in the street with the beggars. Sleeping in the street is not a disgrace in India—many people prefer to sleep outside—but the fact that they are entirely alone and have no one at all to care about them is the sign of their true homelessness.

Soliciting in the street on their own, these women are often arrested, and without a madam to pay their fine, they have to go to jail. They are often sick with fever and hungry. Many of them have boyfriends who are pickpockets and who, when they are not in jail, beat the girls and take their money. These girls only have one another; they form close friendships and are very protective of each other. Their favorite refuge and meeting place is the Olympia Café, the largest and most beautiful café on the street with its mirror-lined walls, and full of potential customers. It also became my favorite place on the street, and it was here that I made friends with many street girls.

I spent hours there, drinking tea and listening to Qawwali (Muslim religious verses)

and Hindi film songs on the juke box. My companions were Asha, seventeen, Mumtaz, seventeen, and Usha, fifteen. Asha is one of the most beautiful girls I have ever seen. Her parents are dead. She has a boyfriend, Ragu, a local pickpocket who is constantly in and out of jail. Once Asha disappeared for four days. I found out that she had been arrested for soliciting. I got one of the local men to bail her out. Whenever I came to Falkland Road at dawn, I would see Asha curled up with one of the other girls, sleeping in the street. I would wait until 8 a.m.; then I would wake her, and we would have tea.

Asha hates being a prostitute, but she doesn't know how else to survive. She dreams of being a servant. I asked friends of mine whether they would hire her, and they told me that, while they themselves wouldn't mind, their other servants wouldn't tolerate her being in the same house with them. Asha charges ten to twelve rupees to customers —a much higher price than most of the other women in the street. She told me, "I wouldn't do it for less. It's not worth it. I don't have to: when people see my face, they will always give me some money for food." Once she said to me, "What kind of a god is this—to give me this face and then to put me in these surroundings?"

The next group of people I got to know on Falkland Road were the transvestites. It is in their nature to be exhibitionistic; seduced by the sight of me pacing up and down with my camera, they ultimately came out and asked to be photographed. The transvestites tend to live clustered together in a block of cages and small brothel rooms right next to each other. My closest friend in that community was Champa, a transvestite madam. Like all madams—female as well as transvestite—he doesn't solicit customers for himself, but like many madams he does have a very close relationship with a boyfriend, Yamin, a taxi driver who is very handsome and very masculine. Champa and I drank beer, and he let me photograph him dressed as "an English lady." He introduced me to other transvestites, and I would arrive early in the afternoon to photograph them putting on their make-up and their elaborate dress for the evening. I learned that many of them are eunuchs, castrated at an early age. Most of their customers are homosexual and seem to find their fullest sexual satisfaction with transvestites.

Champa also has some female prostitutes in his house. One of them is Munni, fifteen years old, small, and beautiful. She was once a beggar on the street, and I think she chose Champa's house because transvestite brothels allow more freedom than female ones. Champa told me, "She is like a daughter to me."

It was much harder to get to know the cage girls on display on Falkland Road. They are considered very low class by the interior brothel girls and suffer abuse and ridicule from customers and other prostitutes. At first glance many of them look outrageous

and obscene as they pose and gesture from behind their bars, with their madam sitting on the step in front like the keeper she is. But as I got to know them, I saw that many were very beautiful and all—even the most seemingly aggressive—very vulnerable.

Fatima, a madam, allowed me to stay with her and her girls for several nights. She sleeps on a huge bed with a bright cover on it in the tiny front room of her cage. Most of the socializing is done in this room. It is separated by a curtain from a very small, dark back room with two beds in it, both with curtains around them; behind the beds is a cement drain and an enormous vat of water. In this space her three girls work, sleep, and bathe.

Fatima's sister is also a madam. She has a cage across the street. One night her sister brought one of her girls to Fatima, who dressed her up in an expensive blue *burqu* and sent her away. I learned later that a pimp from a more expensive area in Bombay had come to Fatima's sister with a commission from an Arab customer who was willing to pay a lot of money for a girl from a good Muslim family. So the pimp had come to the cheapest street in Bombay to find a three-rupee girl with whom to cheat the Arab.

Fatima's favorite girl, Abida, had once been rented by an Arab for a week. Fatima showed me a studio photograph of Abida with the Arab. She is nineteen years old, very attractive, and very successful with customers. A merchant on the street was in love with her and he wanted to take her away. There were terrible fights between Abida and Fatima, since Fatima didn't want her to leave. Abida couldn't decide what to do. About two weeks before I left Bombay, Abida disappeared. When I asked Fatima where she was, she was silent. One woman on the street told me that Abida had been stabbed, another said that she had run away with the merchant. I never found out what had happened to her. Three days later Fatima sold her cage and left. Her two remaining girls were sold to another madam, who took over the cage and repainted the interior a bright blue. I never saw Fatima or Abida again, and I felt I shouldn't ask any more questions. There were many secrets among the women on Falkland Road.

The most élite brothels on Falkland Road are the interior rooms that rise above the cages. They are not in the same class as the numbered houses in other areas, but on this street they are the best. At first when I visited them I was embarrassed and felt like an intruder. Whenever I climbed the stairs, the women would run out of the hallways into their rooms and hide behind the curtains, and a madam would start screaming at me. I decided to concentrate on one house, in the hope that the people in it would

get used to me. It was right next door to the Olympia Café, and I felt I could always run down and take refuge there if necessary.

Number 12 Falkland Road is typical of the other brothels. Three or four stories rise above the cages on the first floor. One enters through a wooden door and mounts steep wooden stairs. Directly to the left is a small brothel room; farther down the hallway is a landing with three more brothel rooms. Each room is a separate "house" with its own madam and her own girls. The madams normally own anywhere from three to ten girls, with five about the average. The girls go only into the hallway. They never enter rooms other than their own, or go upstairs or downstairs, or—apart from visits to the doctor or brief errands—go out into the street. During the day they stay in their rooms, cook on the floor, sleep, sew, play with the children. It is all very much like normal Indian family life.

Saroja, a madam, has two rooms on the third floor of this house. Since my attempts on the second floor had been so frustrating, I felt inhibited about climbing up another story. But Saroja said to me, "Welcome. Come on in."

Saroja is twenty-six years old but looks forty. Like all madams, she has complete control over her girls. The relationship is one of master and slave—but also of mother and daughter. The girls worship and fear their madam. One night Putla, Saroja's youngest girl, allowed a drunken customer to have her for only three rupees. Saroja grabbed her by the hair and pounded her with her fists. Putla didn't utter a sound. The other girls stood by and watched silently. Five minutes after her beating Putla was ready for work again, her face washed and her dress changed. Later that night I saw Putla embracing Saroja and giving her a back massage.

In Saroja's house all the sex takes place on two beds with brightly patterned curtains around them. In the same small room there is another bed used as a waiting bench for the girls and their customers. At the end of the narrow room is Saroja's bed, a dresser, and a window overlooking Falkland Road. The girls from Saroja's house, along with the girls from the other brothel rooms, solicit customers at the doorway and in the hall. Sometimes there is a bit of competition among them, but there is also a strong feeling of solidarity—especially when it comes to protecting one another against the customers.

At the beginning of the evening, when the first customer arrives, the madam blesses each girl. At the end of the evening she divides, fifty-fifty, the money that each girl has collected and placed in her own little wooden box with a small lock on it that hangs on the wall. At 1 a.m. the lights are turned out and the "all-night" customers come in. To spend the night with a particular girl they pay from thirty rupees on up (ordinary

customers pay five rupees). One night while I was there the police came into the house and arrested several girls for soliciting in the hallways. The madams went out to bargain with them, and one Nepalese madam hid me under her bed until it was all over. "I don't mind paying money to the police," she told me. "After all, they have families to support too." I felt very safe under her bed: safe and protected and accepted.

Saroja had been kidnapped from her village in South India at the age of twelve and taken to Bombay. She worked as a prostitute, gradually saving and borrowing enough money to have her own girls and become a madam. She told me: "My dream is to have my own house—a bungalow like the numbered ones on Foras Road, with separate rooms for my girls. I could have a refrigerator and sell alcohol and cold drinks. I could have a guard in front to keep the police out. I could have a better class of customers —even foreigners."

Saroja is very attached to her girls. One of them, Kamla, fell in love with a waiter and ran off with him. Huge tears fell from Saroja's eyes, and all the other girls wept too. One day Saroja told me about one of her girls: "Rekha is actually my daughter. I had her when I was thirteen. See how much we look alike. She just got her period one year ago."

When the girls get pregnant, it is up to them whether they have the baby or not. Abortion is legal in India, and there is a local abortionist who is also a sex-change doctor. He told me: "I can't understand why men go to prostitutes. I have only one woman, my wife. I say to men all the time, 'Don't put your cock inside a dirty prostitute—if you make love with your wife and close your eyes, it is all the same.' "

There are many children running in and out of the brothel rooms. In the same house as Saroja there lives a beautiful twenty-two-year-old girl, Sharda, with her two sons, Yellapa, eleven months old, and Mari, three. Mari is an extraordinary child. He is beautiful, intelligent, and sensitive. He is in love with Saroja, and she adores him. He spends hours sitting on her bed, and when she has a headache he rubs tiger balm on her temples. When he has fever, which is often, he sleeps with her. One of the brothel jokes is for Saroja to say to Mari: "What does Putla do? What does Kamla do? What does Rekha do?" Mari answers by making a fucking sign with his fist, and the whole house roars with laughter. Whenever Saroja or one of her girls is upset, Mari is upset too.

Saroja and I became closer and closer. Sometimes I stayed in her house until the lights went out and the all-night customers came in. We ordered tea from downstairs and sat and talked. Once I went to a street fair with her and her girls.

One night I invited her to a restaurant. I wanted to take her someplace special, in another part of town. But as soon as we arrived I knew I had made a mistake. She was

overdressed and felt uncomfortable and out of place. The only place where Saroja really felt relaxed was sitting on her bed in her brothel room.

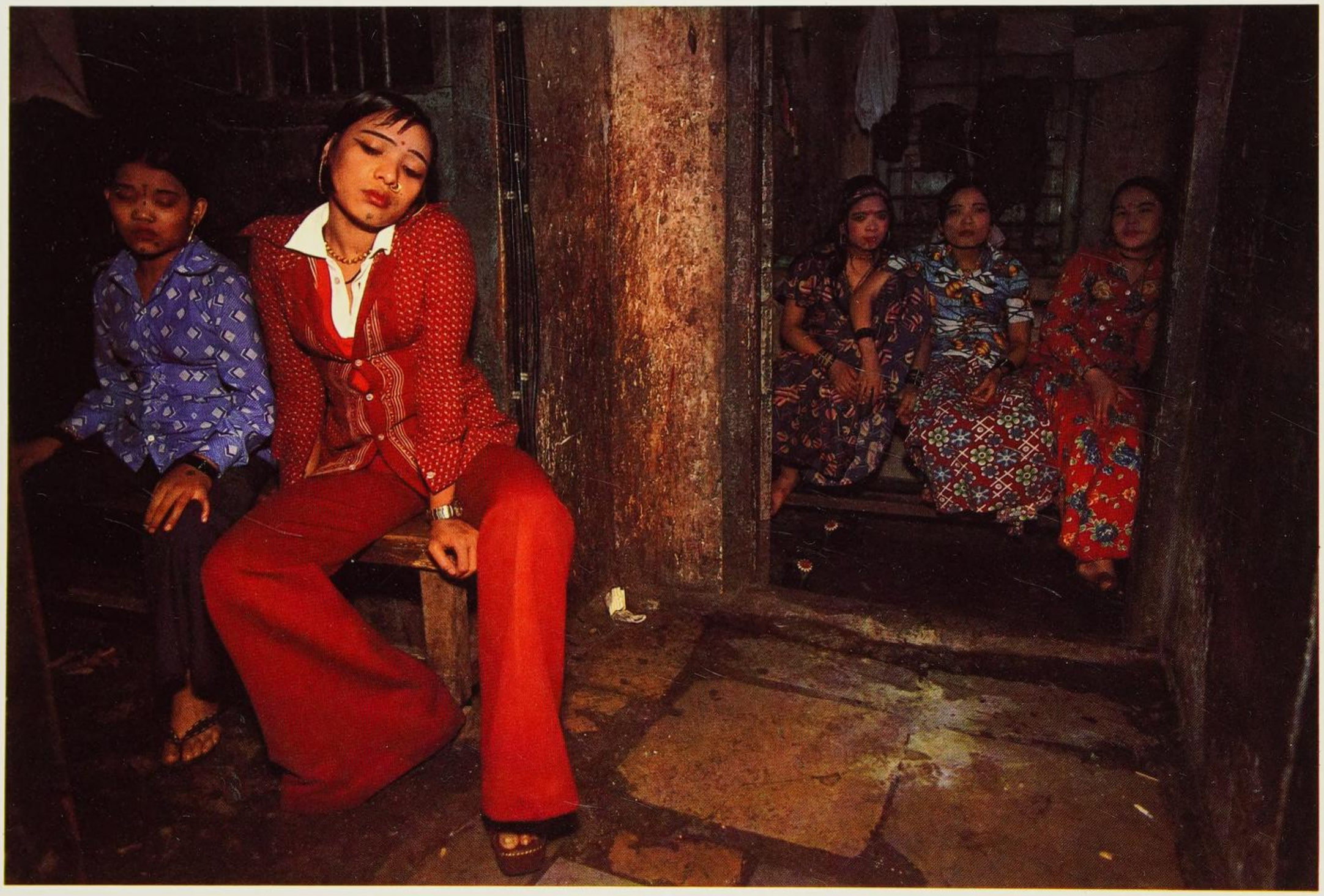
Saroja never asked me anything personal. No one did. They wanted to know only my age, why I didn't wear a brassiere, and why I wasn't married. I think the reason I was finally accepted was that I was single—alone in the world like they were. One madam told me, "We are sisters. You and I are fated for the same life. Every night I say my prayers and I sleep alone."

Saying goodbye was painful. Saroja and I hugged, and she presented me with an enormous garland of flowers. We all cried. Mari came in, and he too started to cry. Women waved farewell from their windows. I went by the cages, and some of the women came out to shake my hand. Champa, the transvestite madam, ran across the street: "Send me a wig from America, sister, and every time I wear it I will think of you!"

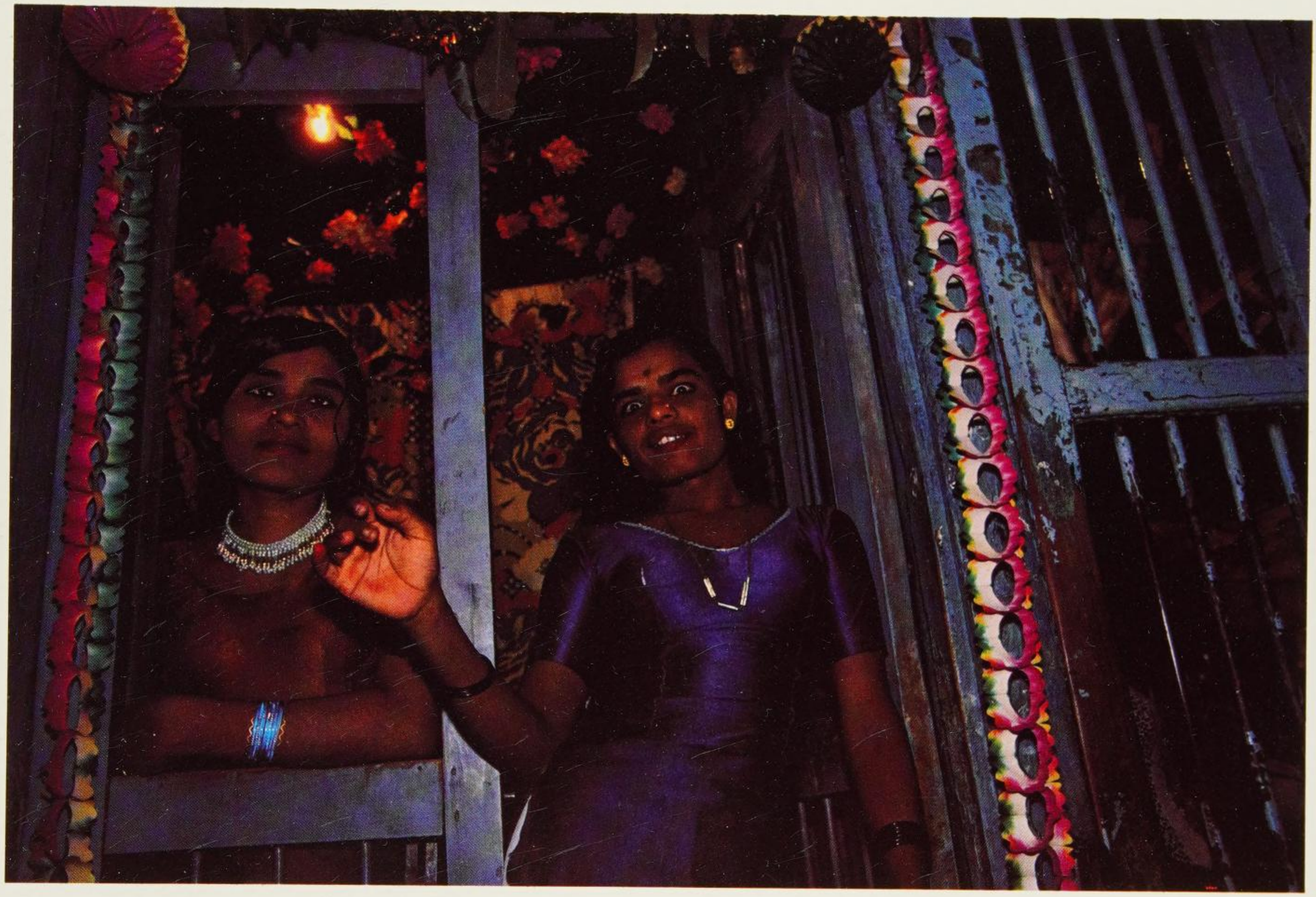
One last tea at the Olympia Café. Asha and Usha and many other friends gathered around the table. I started to cry. "You shouldn't weep," said Asha. "You should say goodbye with your head up and proud and then leave." She walked me out into the street to find a taxi. "You'd better not forget me," she said.

FALKLAND ROAD

Cages on Falkland Road at night.



Nepalese girls waiting for customers.



Cages. *Madam*: "Cage girls are the lowest—they only charge two rupees." (Seven rupees equals one dollar.)

Alleyway behind Falkland Road.

Champa, a transvestite madam, at the doorway of his cage. He has lived in the community a long time and is an important figure to the other transvestite prostitutes. "When I was young I was beaten up by my madam and the other transvestites. It cost me four thousand rupees to buy my freedom."

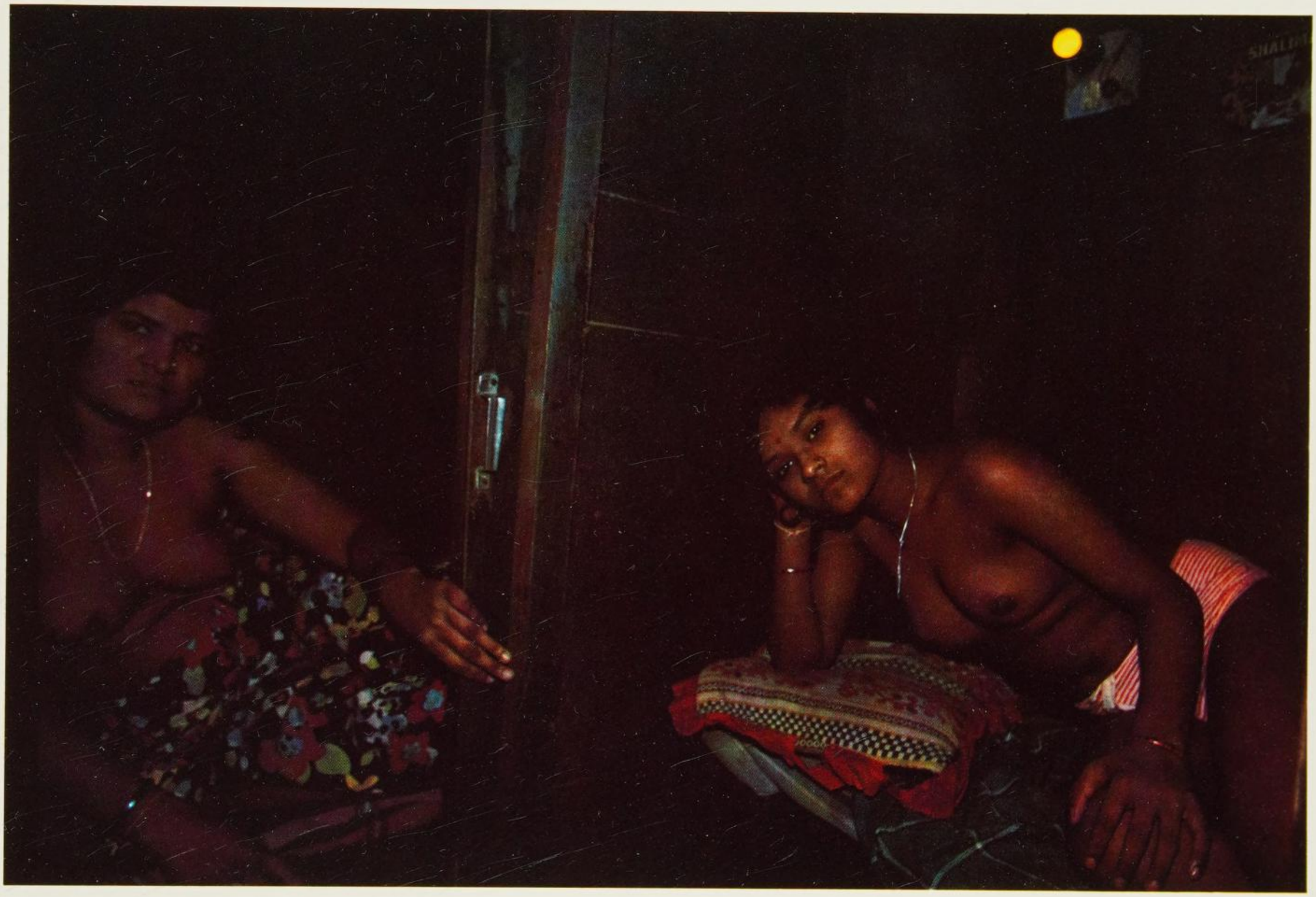
Several times each day the madam and her girls have tea, which is brought in from cafés and vendors on the street.

The brothel hallway at night.

A madam of one of the more expensive houses with her girls. "I'm good to my girls. I take them to the movies once a month. Business is bad now, but I still buy good food. I spent seven hundred and fifty rupees for clothes for Christmas."

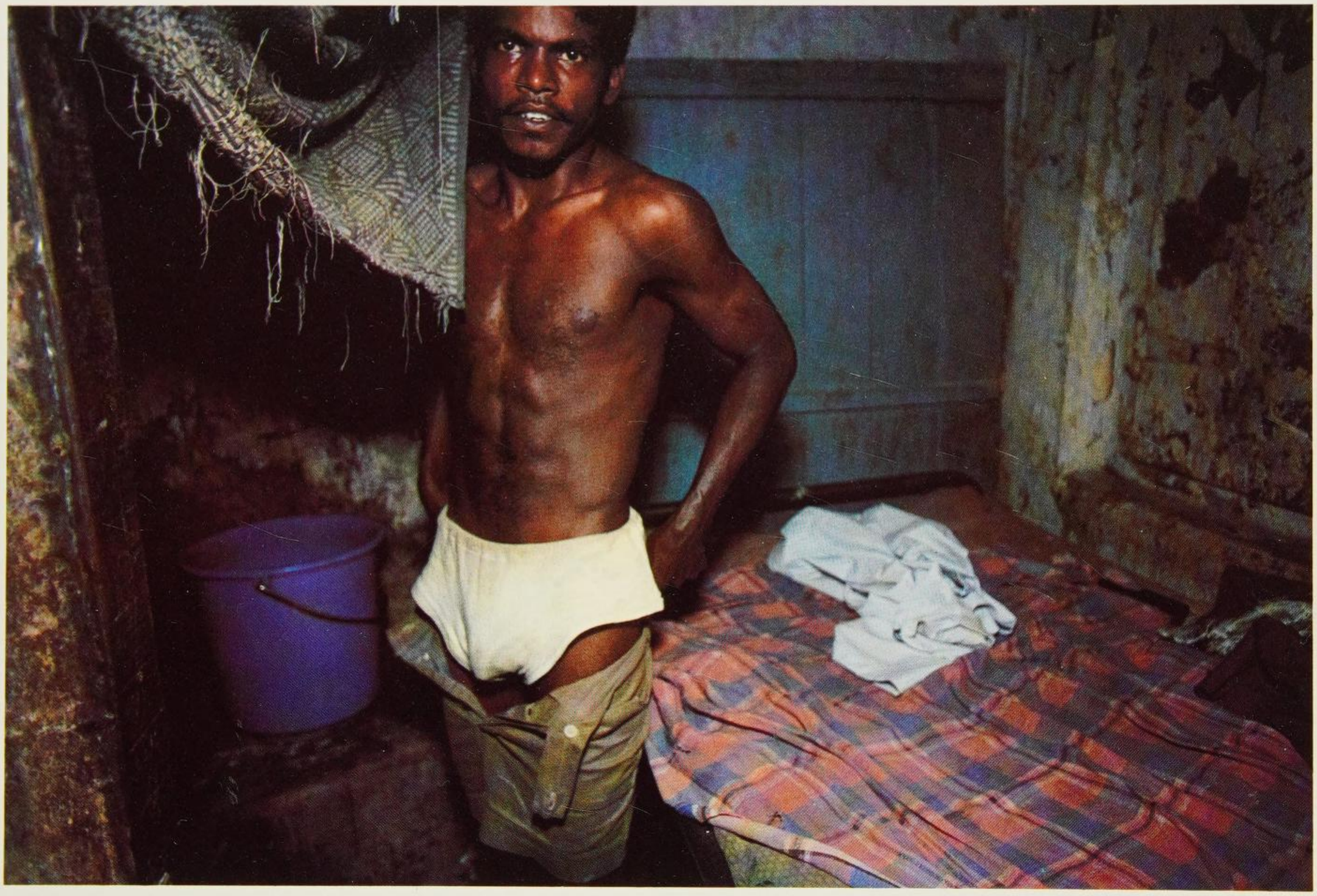
Tarana (right), a transvestite, with a potential customer.

At the entrance to a transvestite cage.



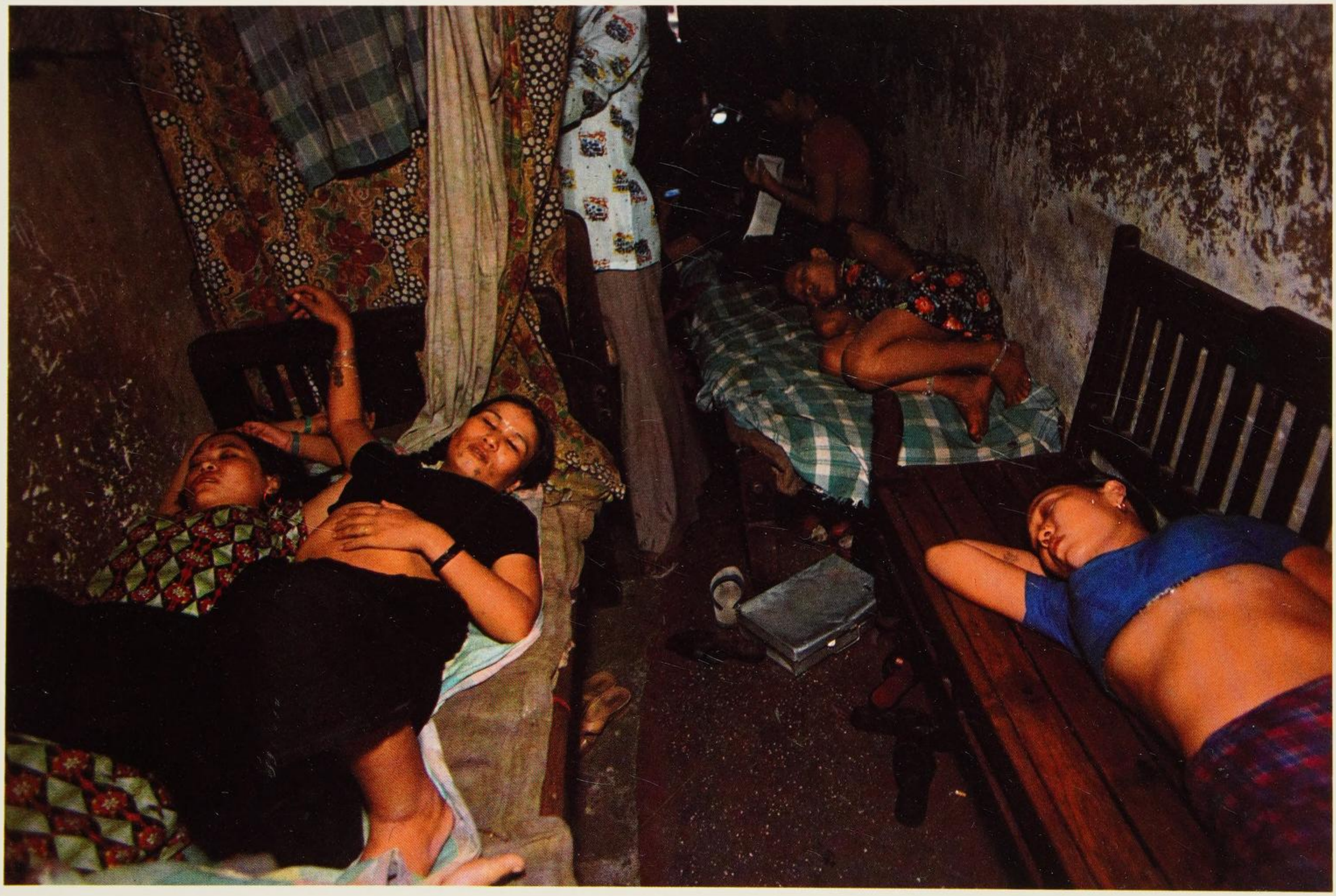
Lalita, the madam of this house, thought Nina (right) to be the most beautiful of all her girls. The day I came to photograph Nina, her madam dressed her in new pink panties.

I would hear voices from behind the curtains. Once, a customer ("My glasses, my glasses, where are my glasses?") and a thirteen-year-old prostitute ("Come on now, behave—be proper.").

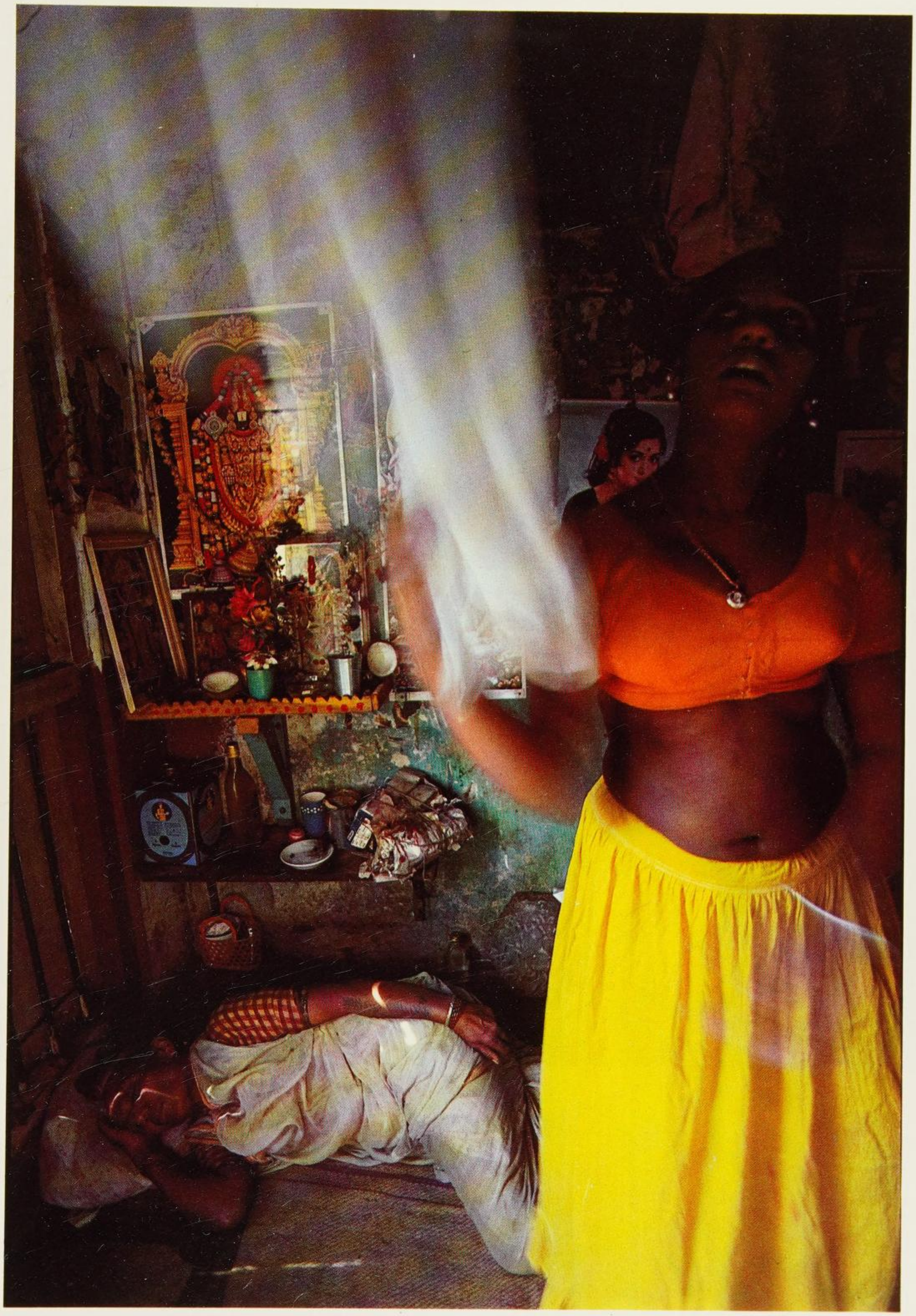


Ragini, a transvestite. The man on the bed claims to be one hundred years old. He is retired now, and the other transvestites take care of him.

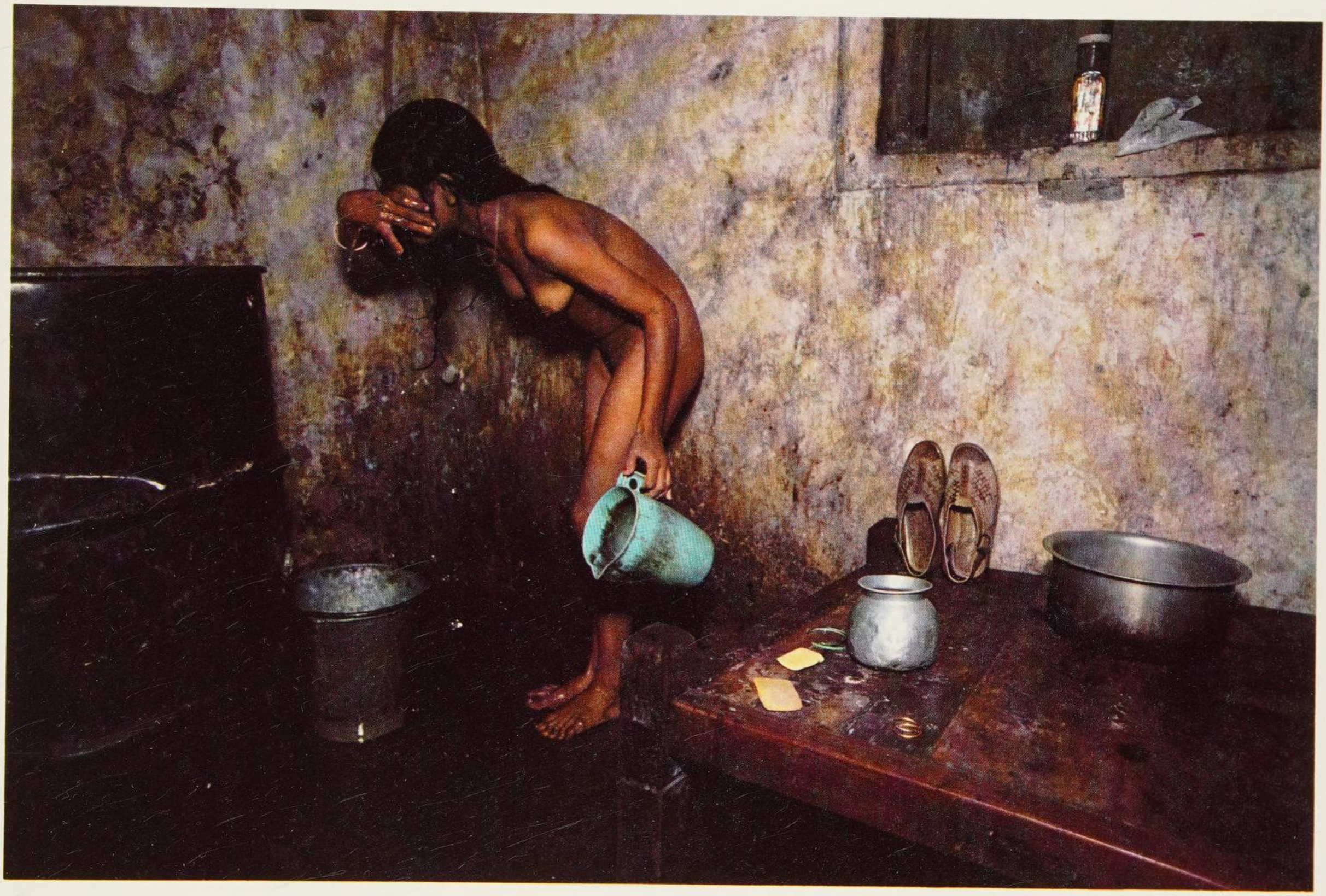
Kamla with a potential customer. "Last night a customer paid me one hundred rupees to spend the whole night. A man that stupid is not worth marrying."



Nepalese girls taking their afternoon nap.

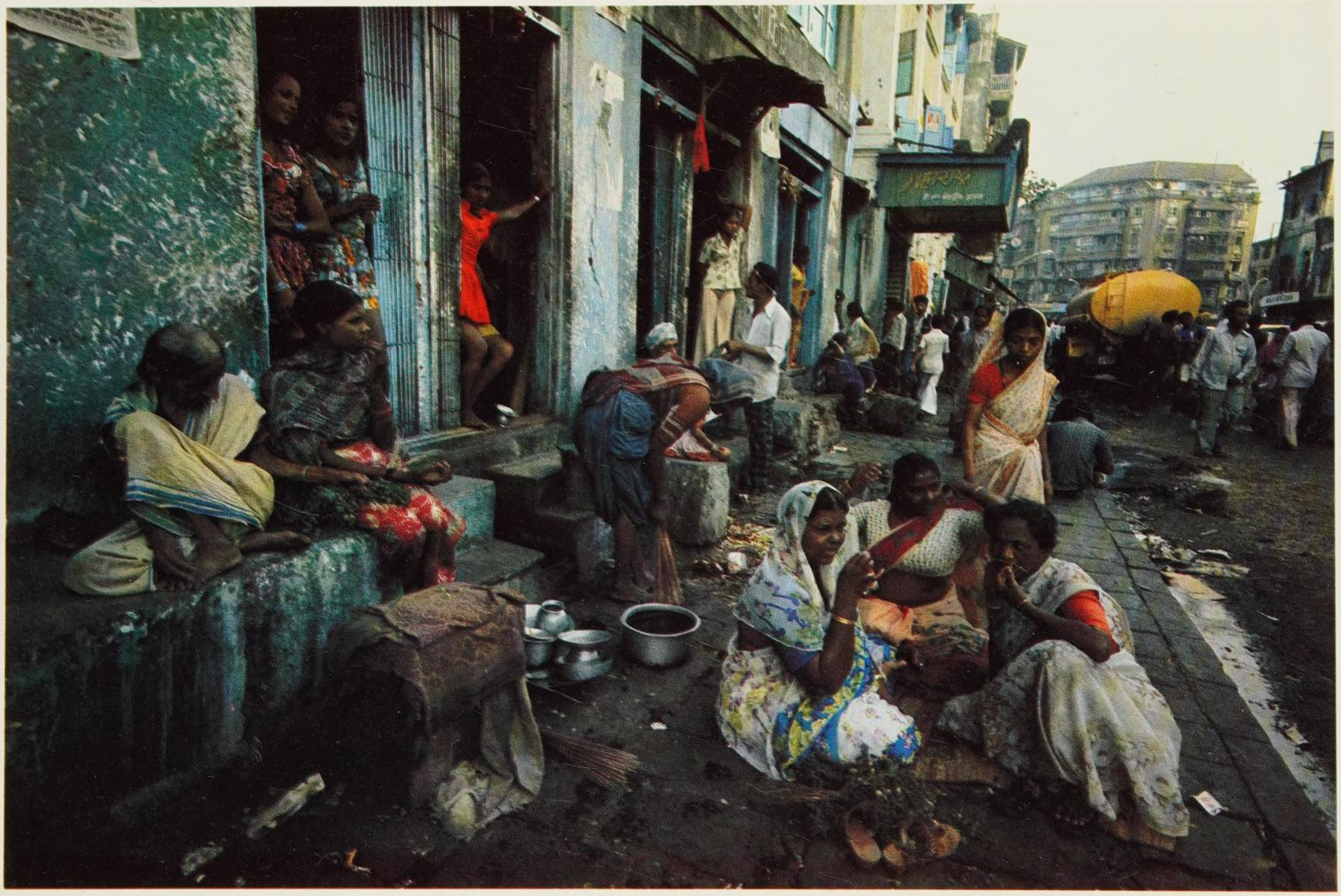


Mid-afternoon.

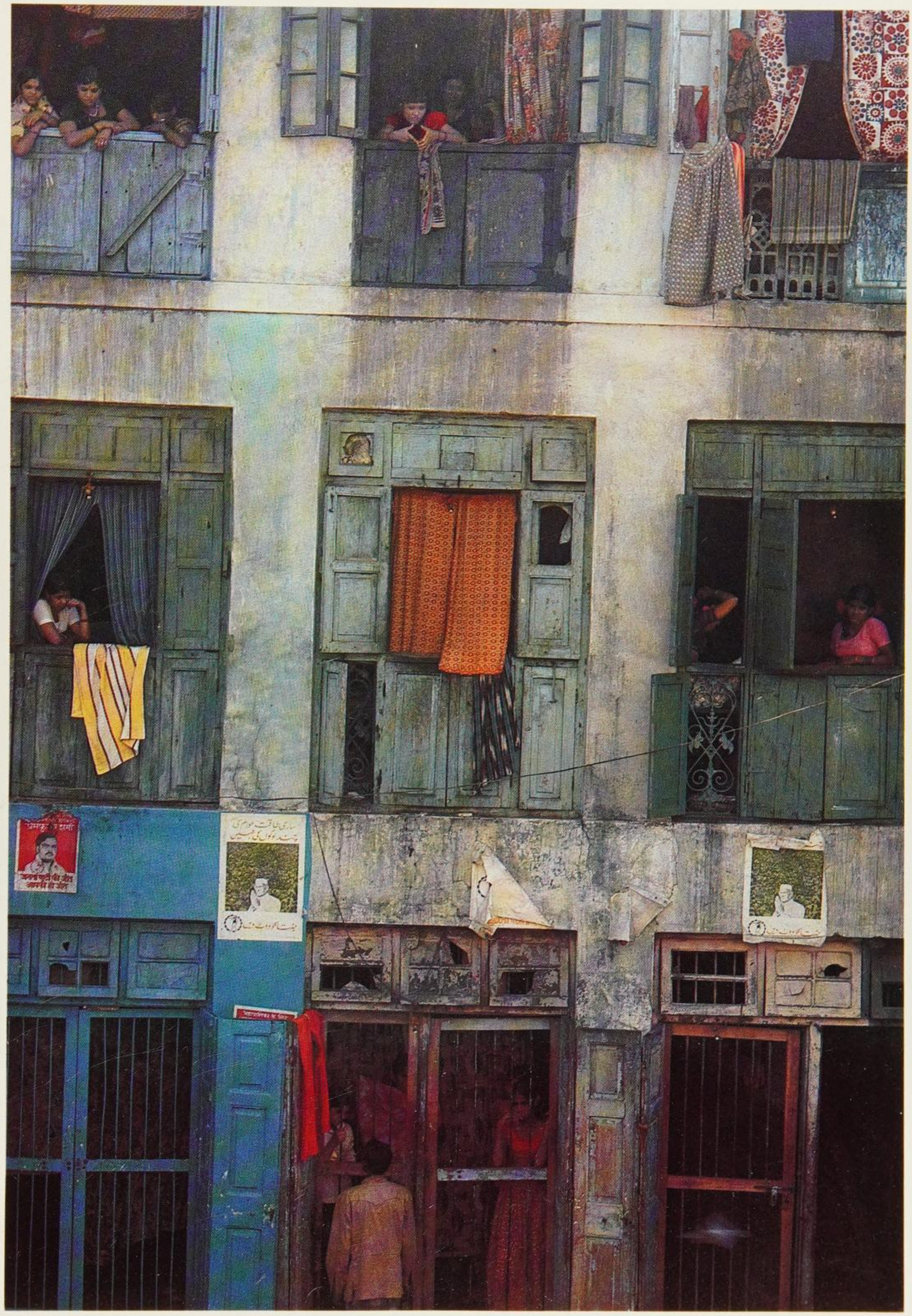


The girls bathe, very thoroughly, at least once a day.

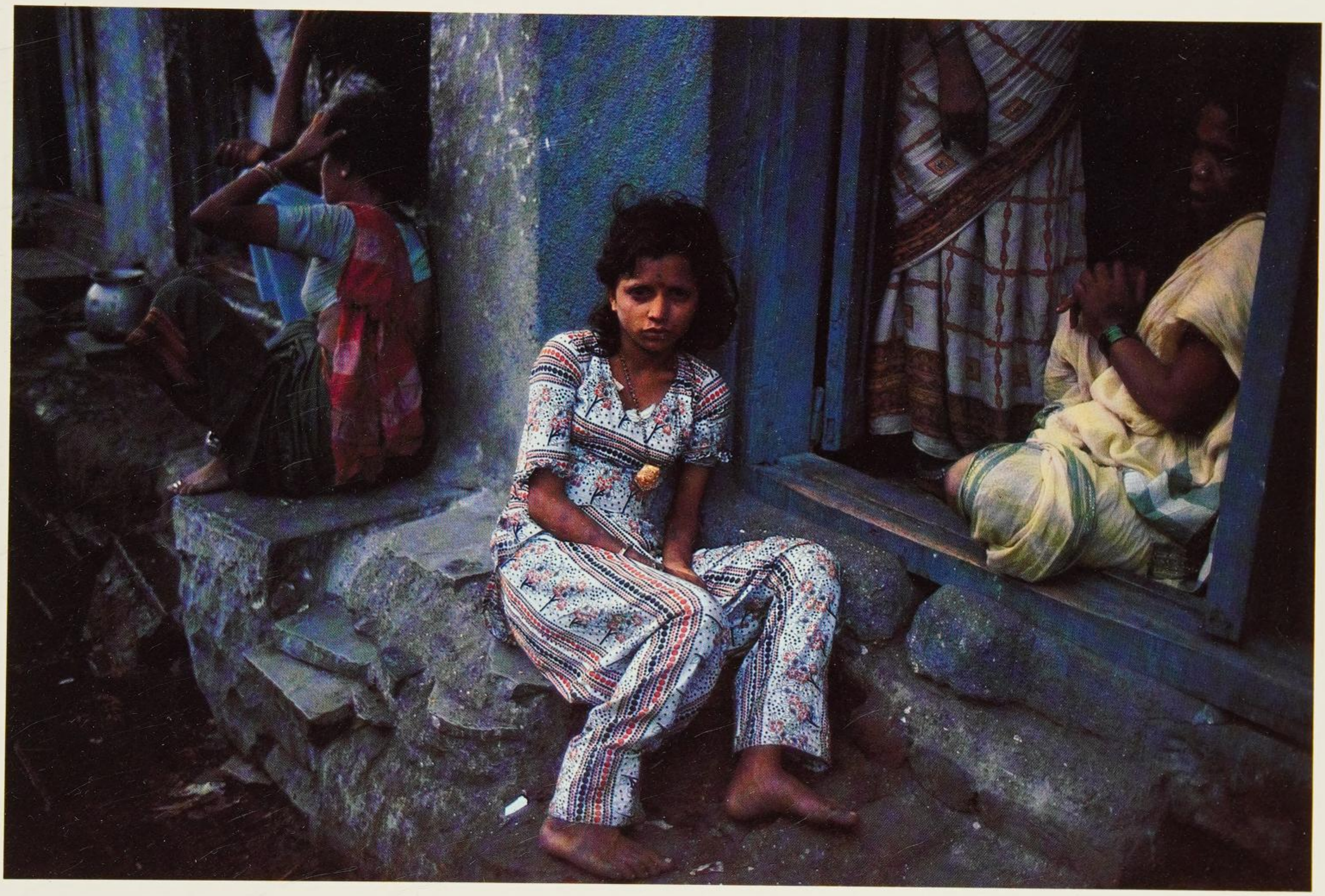
A madam (left) with one of her girls. *Madam*: "Given the choice,
I would have rather stayed in my village. But if I had stayed there,
I would never have known what I had missed."



Late afternoon.



On Falkland Road some of the prostitutes attract customers from cages on the street level. The brothel rooms are above.



A young street prostitute.

Early morning in the Olympia Café.

A young street prostitute in the Olympia Café. *Madam*: "I would never let a street girl live in my house. They are too independent. They steal and they often have boyfriends who are pickpockets or thieves. I wouldn't let my girls associate with these kinds of girls."

Most madams insist that the rooms of their brothel be kept clean. The girls sweep each day, and every year on January 1 the rooms are thoroughly scrubbed.

Madam: "I paid four thousand rupees' deposit for my large room and two thousand rupees for my small room. Each day I must pay a total of eighty rupees for the two rooms. A man comes every morning to collect each day's rent. I also pay thirteen rupees a day for my water supply and seven rupees a month for each bed in the room. I am paying this much every month because I am not renting directly from the Parsi who owns this building—I am paying through a whole stream of middlemen. If I were to buy the lease directly, it would cost me forty thousand rupees."

The girls use a lot of powder to lighten their skin—light skin to them is more beautiful. I was often asked: "Why do you always photograph dark-skinned girls?"

Kanta: "I could never visit my parents. I haven't seen them for years.
I don't know if they are dead or alive. But I could never visit them.
I would bring shame to them."

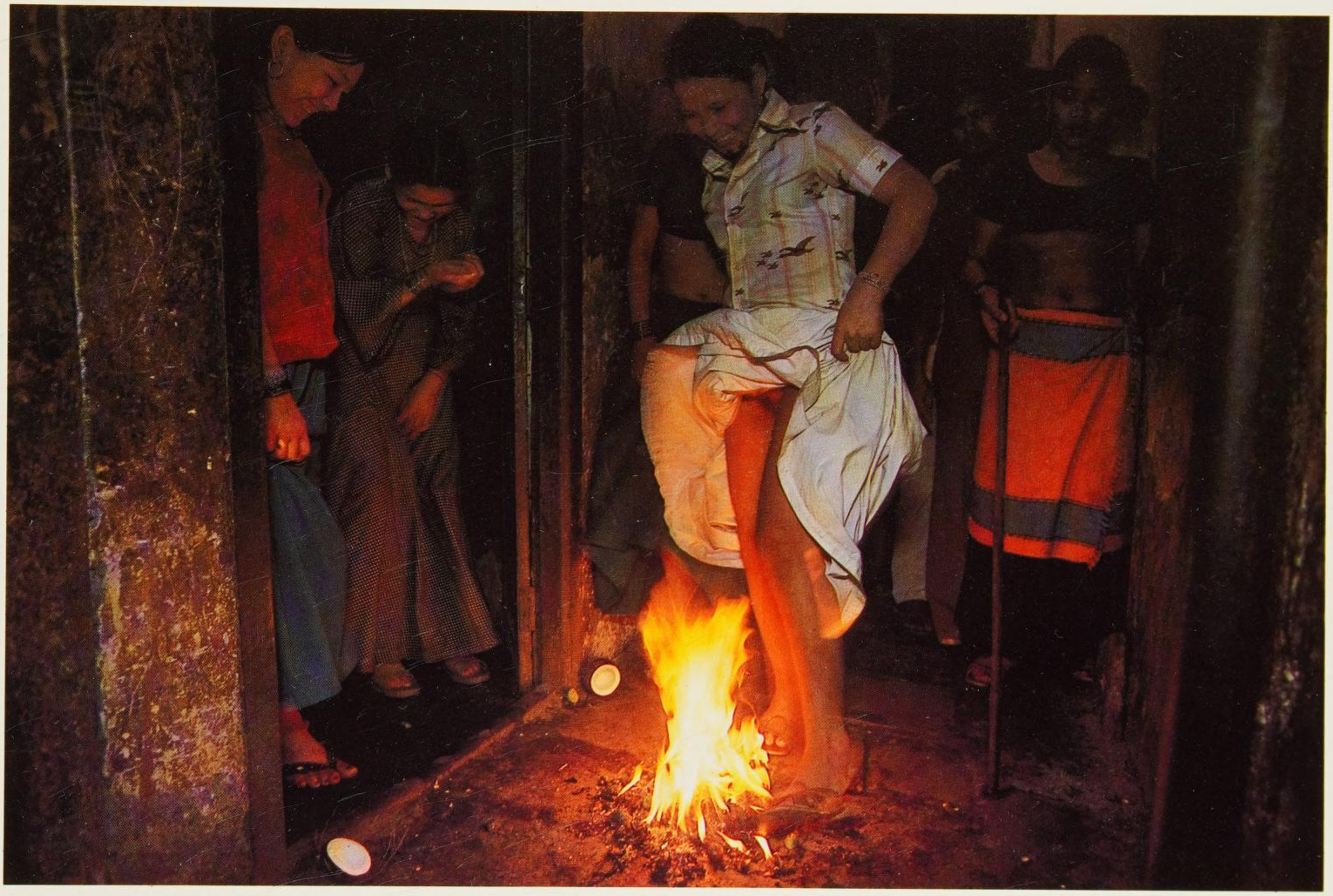
The young sons of two prostitutes posing in the brothel where they live.

Saroja (middle) is a madam. She is twenty-six. The little boy's name is Mari. He is the son of Sharda. *Saroja*: "His father is a pickpocket. His father is very beautiful—well, look at Mari—but he ran away."

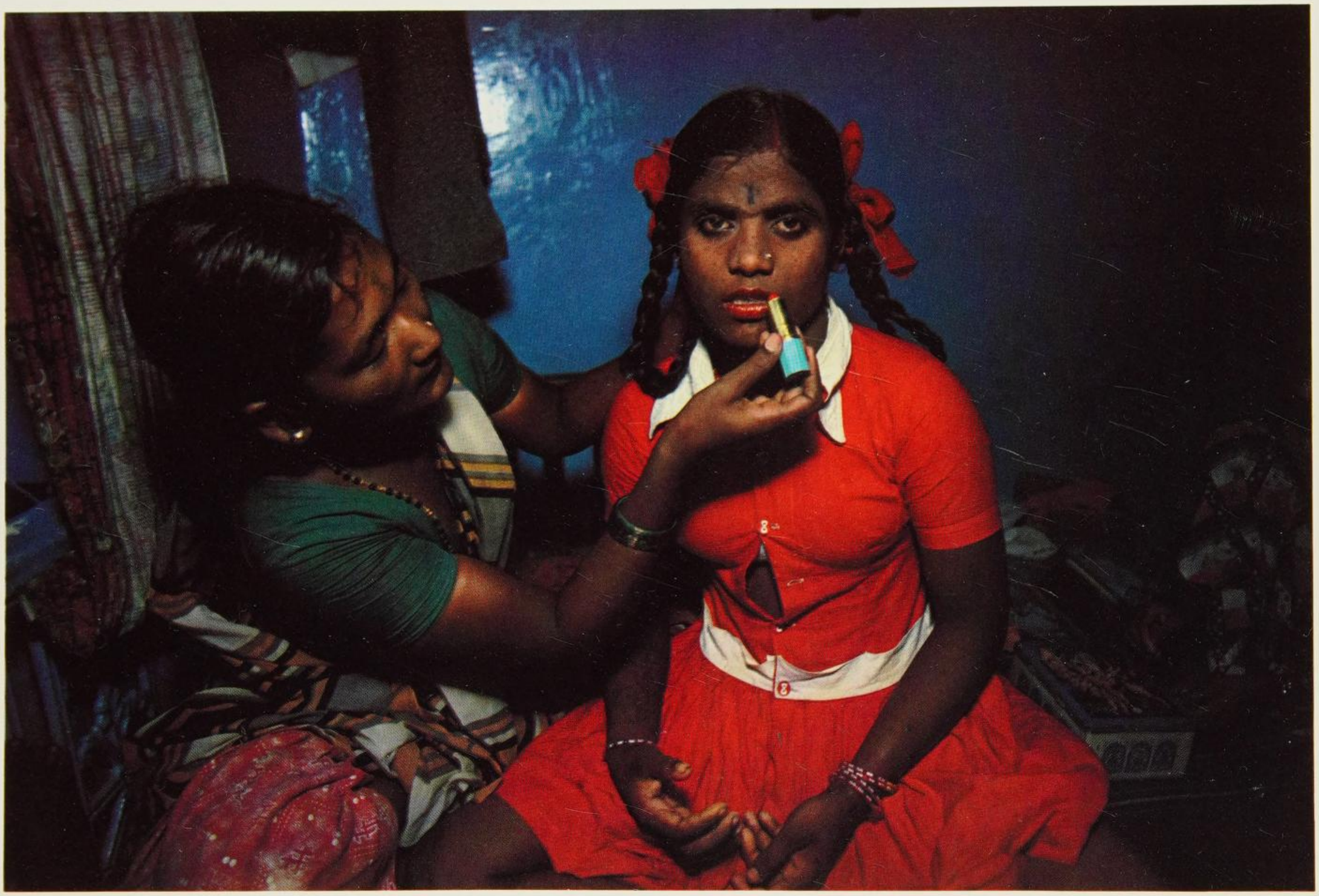
At six o'clock each afternoon the girls prepare for work. Each has her own make-up box. This is one of the more expensive houses.

Champa, a transvestite, with his pet goat, getting dressed for the night.

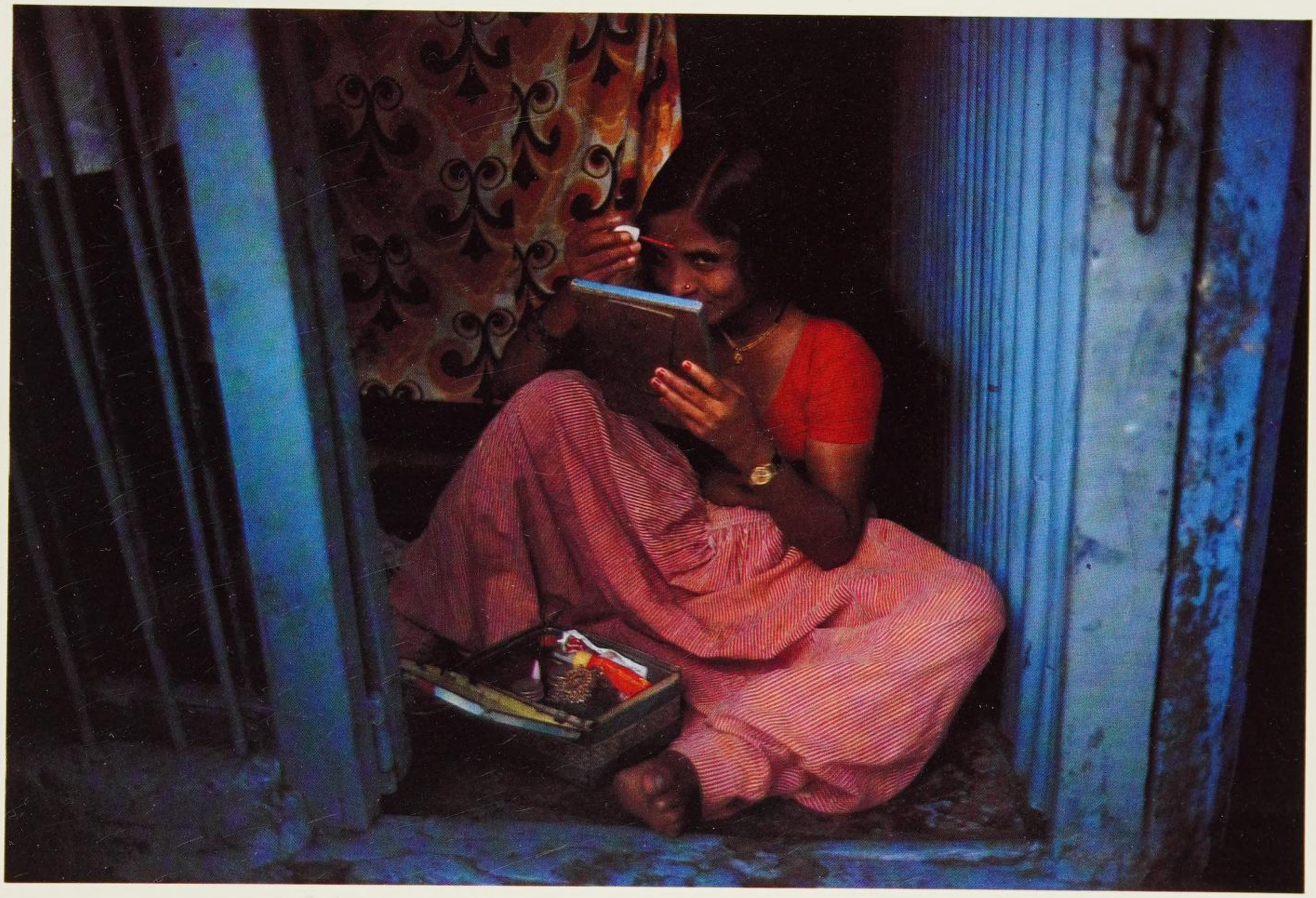
Madam: "Lalita is bold and not ashamed—she will do anything for money. Once she even went with a woman and got paid two hundred rupees. Shanta is shy, but she is pretty. She gets many customers. She will never let a man kiss her on the lips."



Every Saturday and the first day of every month, the girls perform a fire ceremony to ward off the evil eye. *Maya*: "We are pretty, we dress well, and many people look at us. We must be careful of the evil eye."



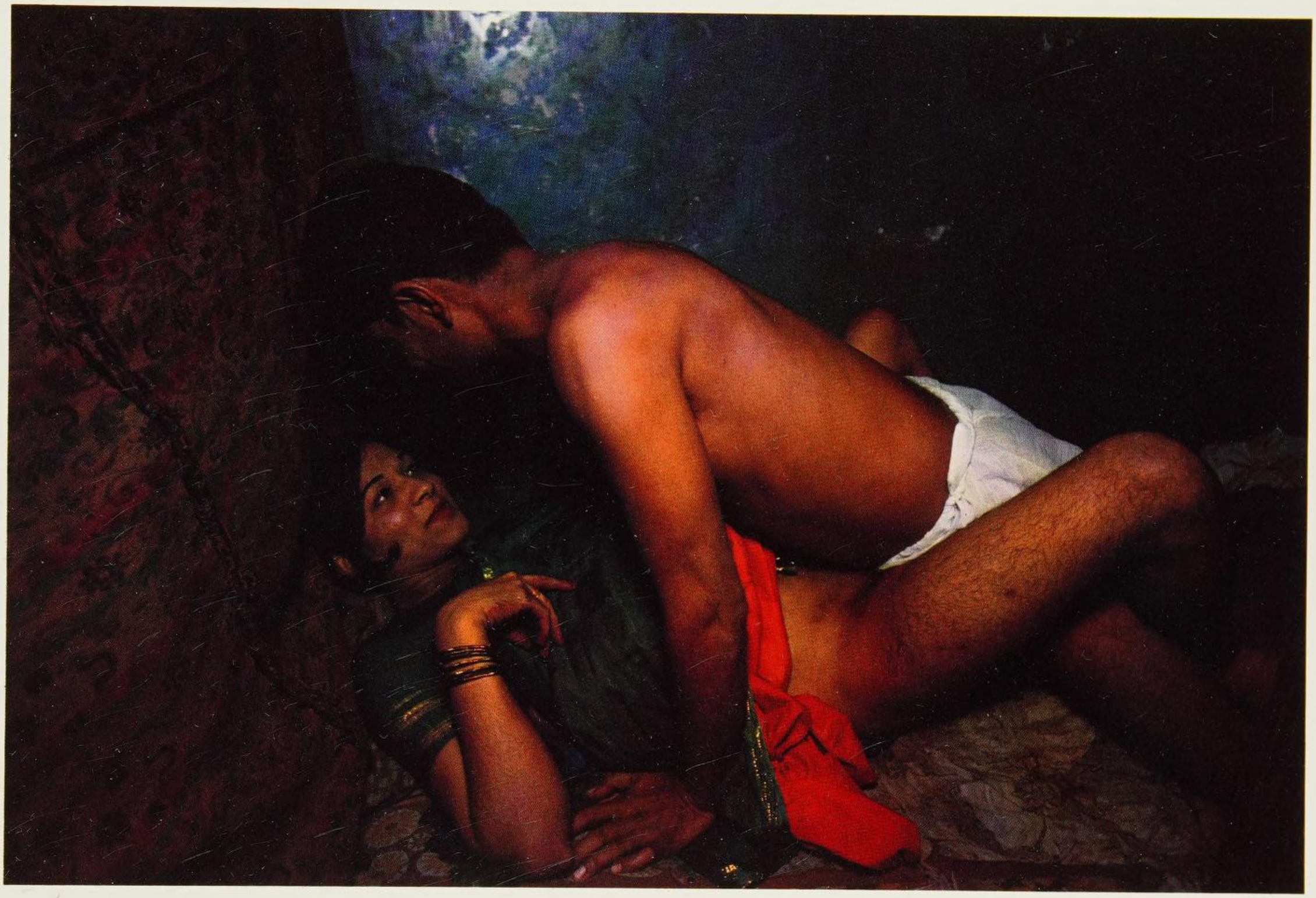
The girl who is being made-up was brought to the brothel by the people of her village because her husband had left her. A few days later they changed their minds and came to take her back. She was an epileptic and they were afraid that the goddess inhabiting her would get angry and avenge herself on the village.



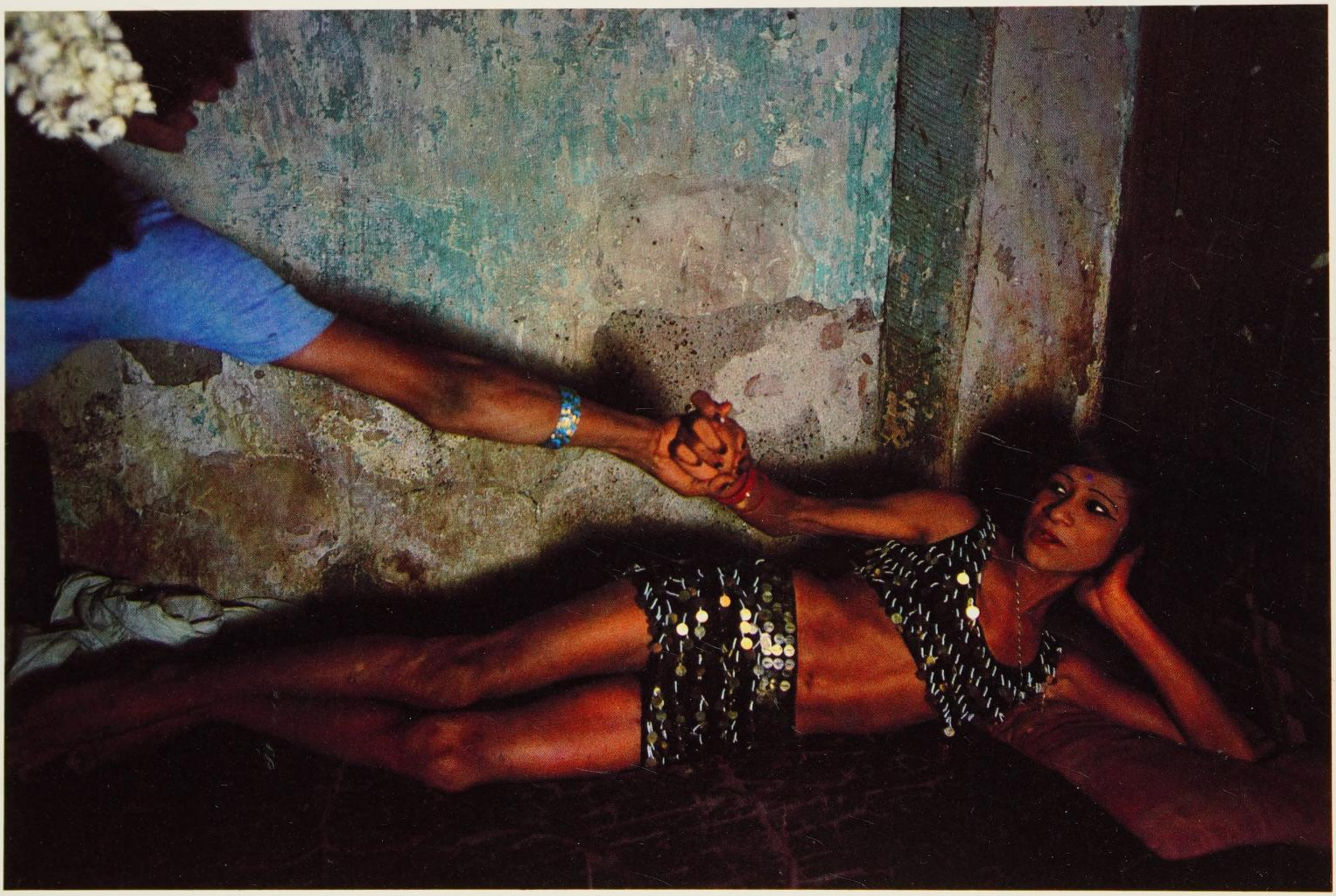
Madam: "What do you think of my new girl? Is she too dark?
Her husband didn't want her, so she came here."

Transvestites getting dressed in a courtyard.

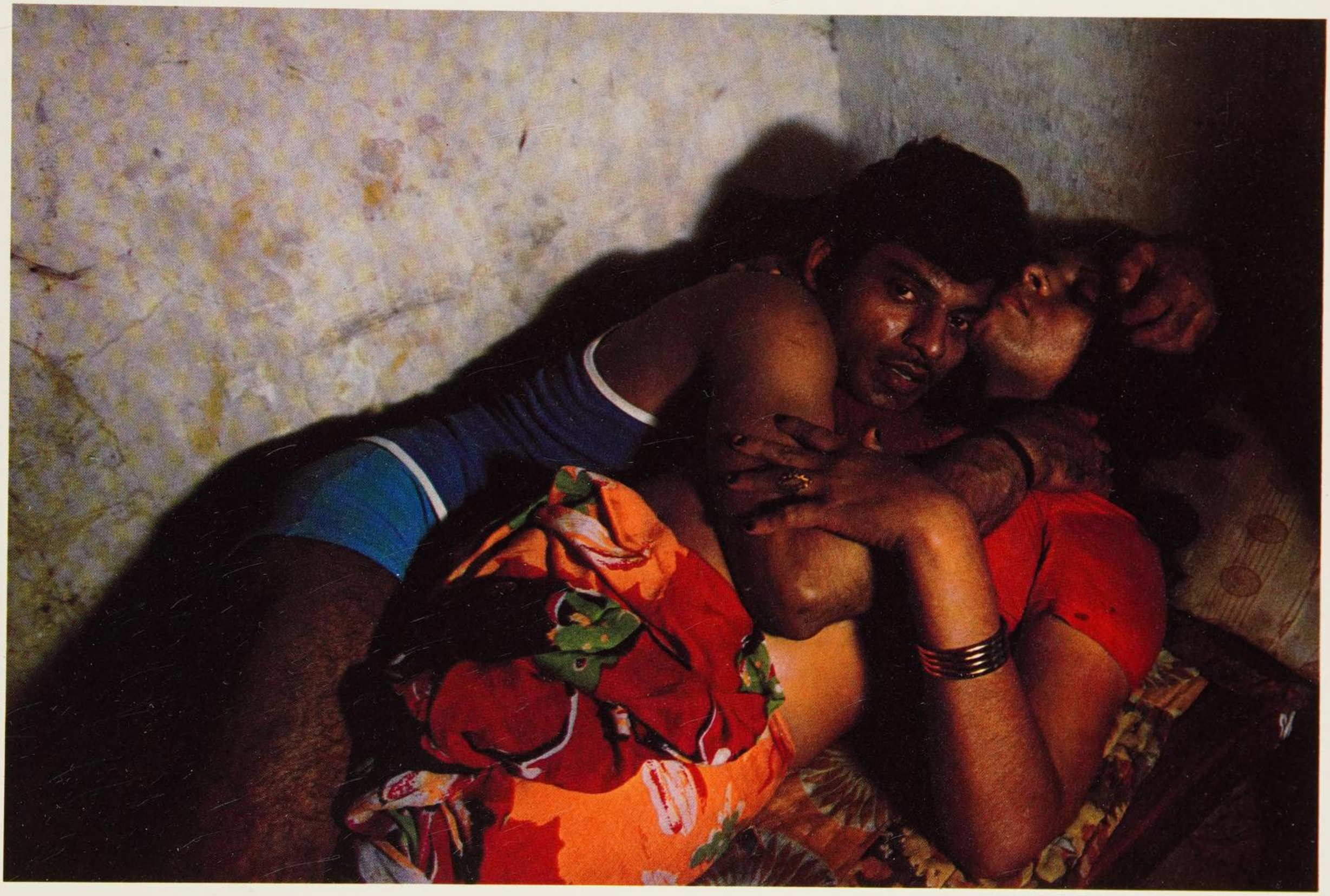
Madam: "The girls work even during their periods. They wash first, and then the customer doesn't know."



A customer with Tarana. Tarana is a transvestite.

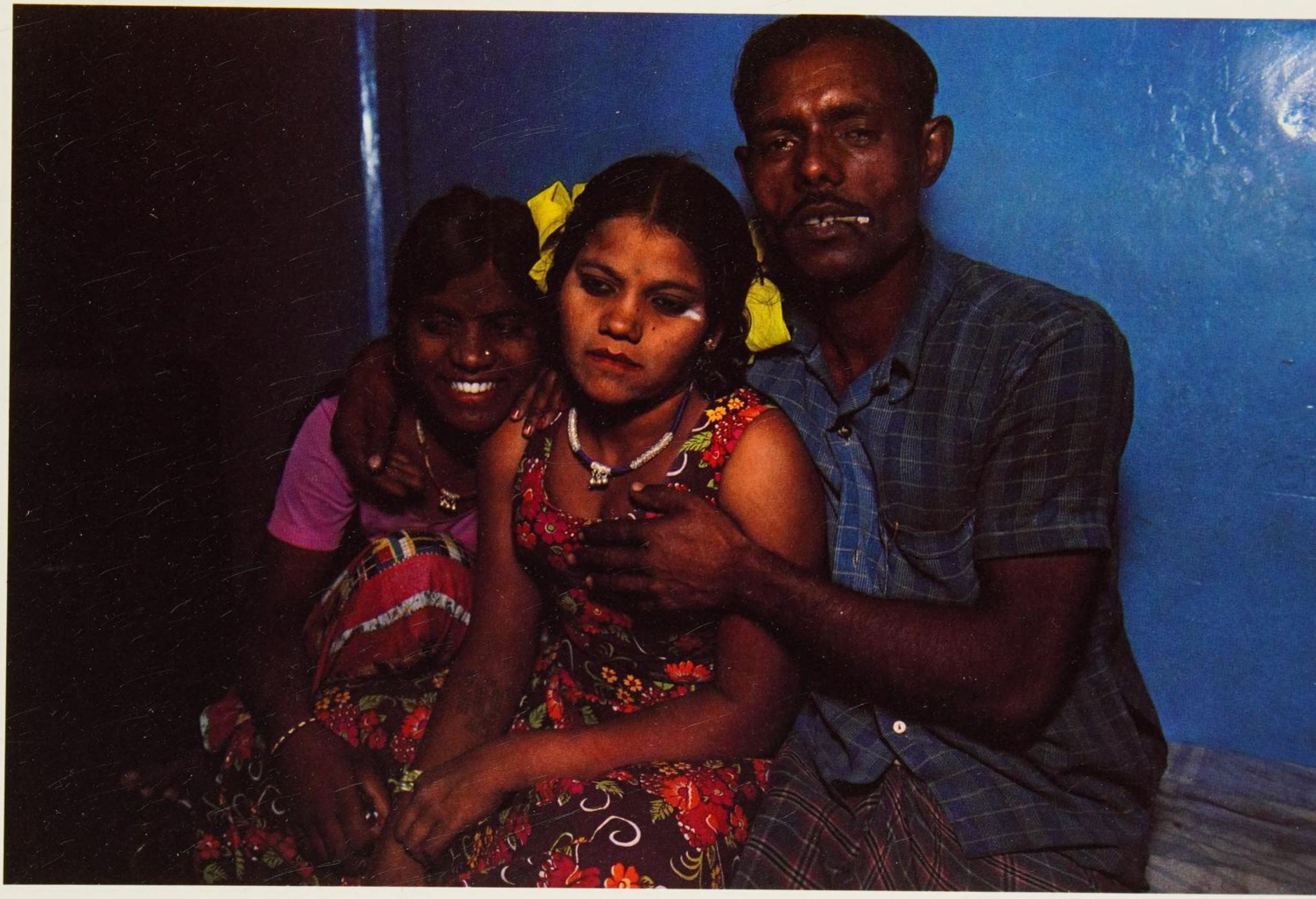


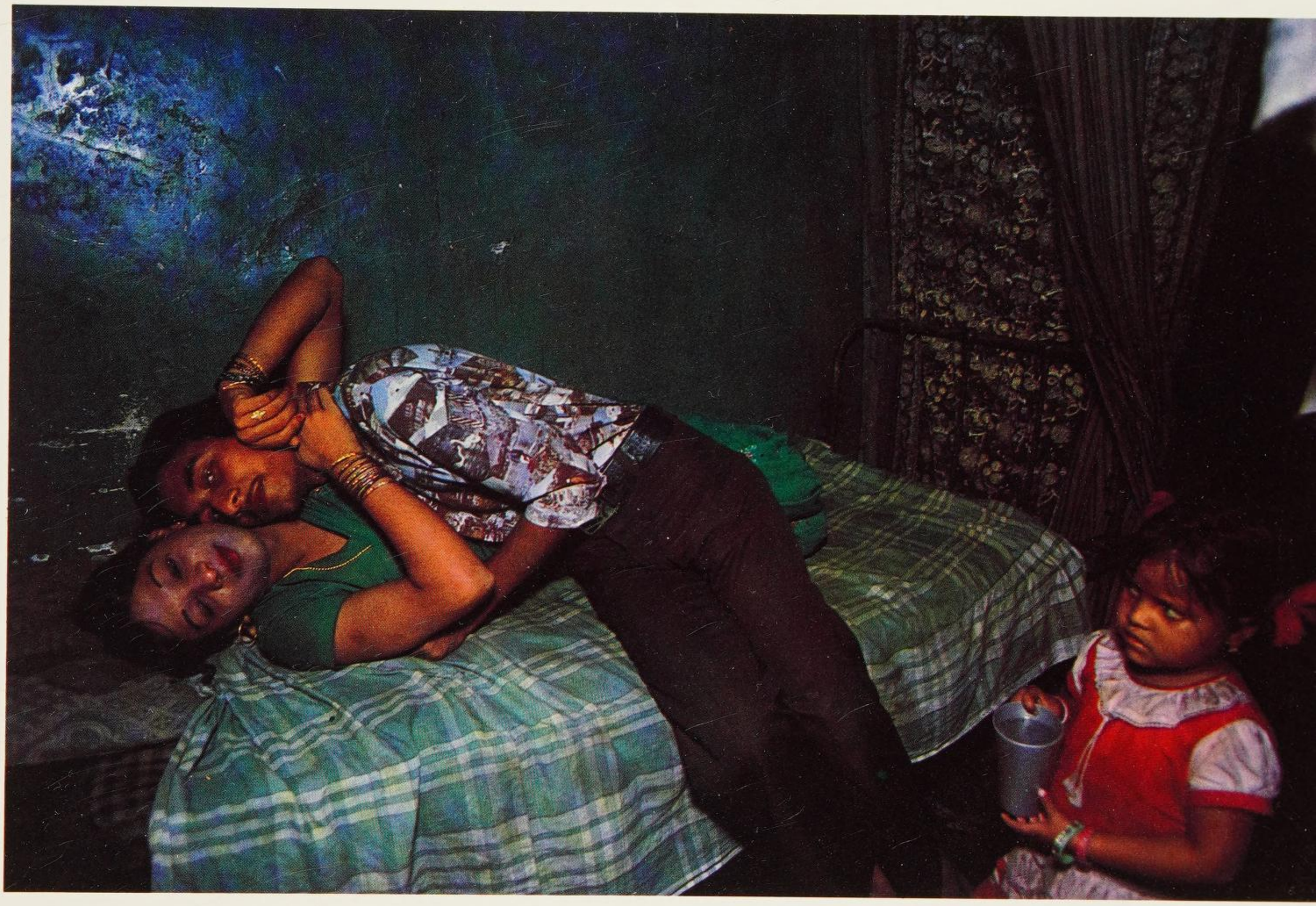
Transvestites in a brothel. *Hygerias*: "As transvestites we are not allowed to dress as men, wear blue bangles, or ride bikes."



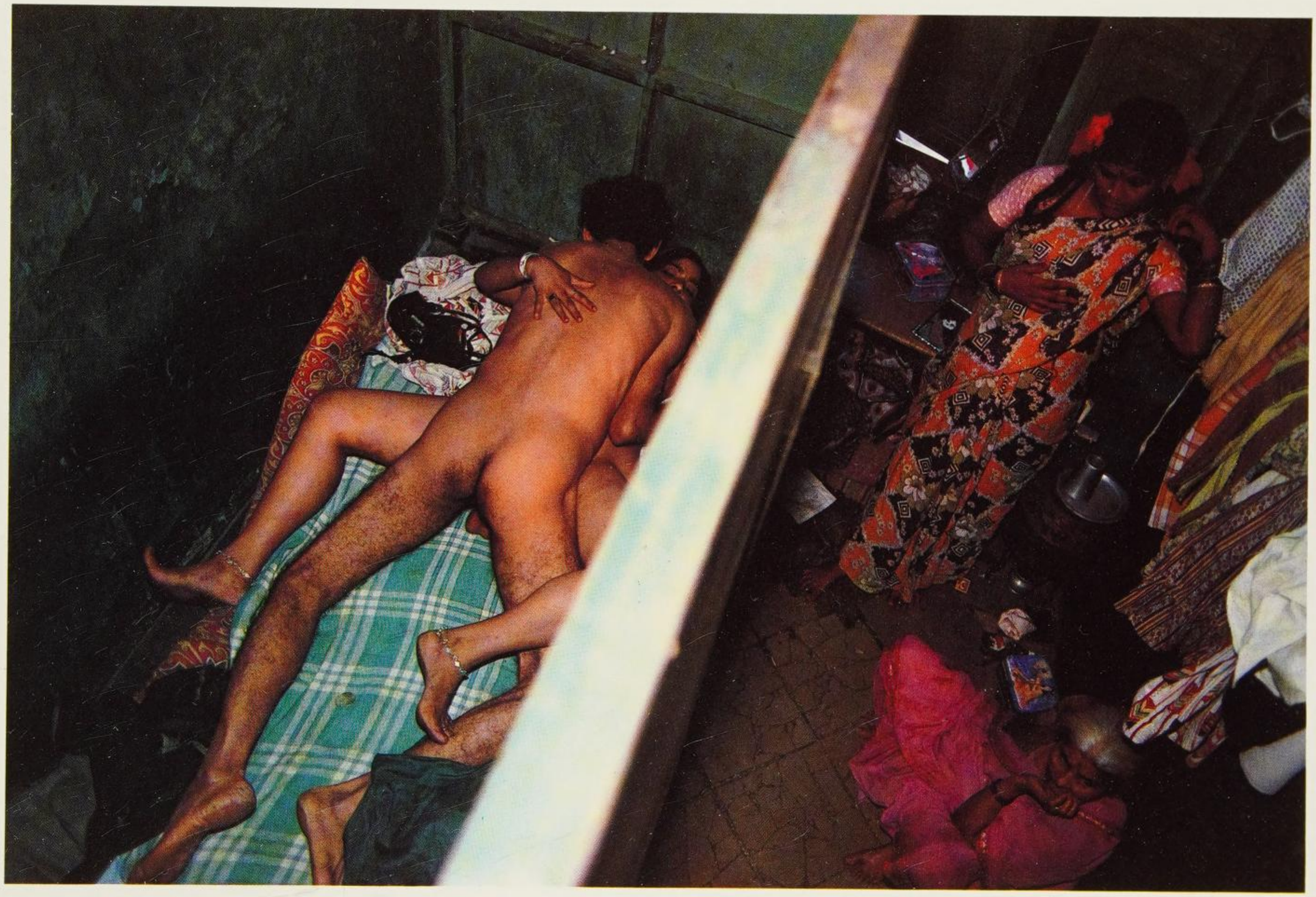
A transvestite with his boyfriend, who is a truck driver. One day the truck driver's wife came to the brothel and made a scene.

Nepalese women.





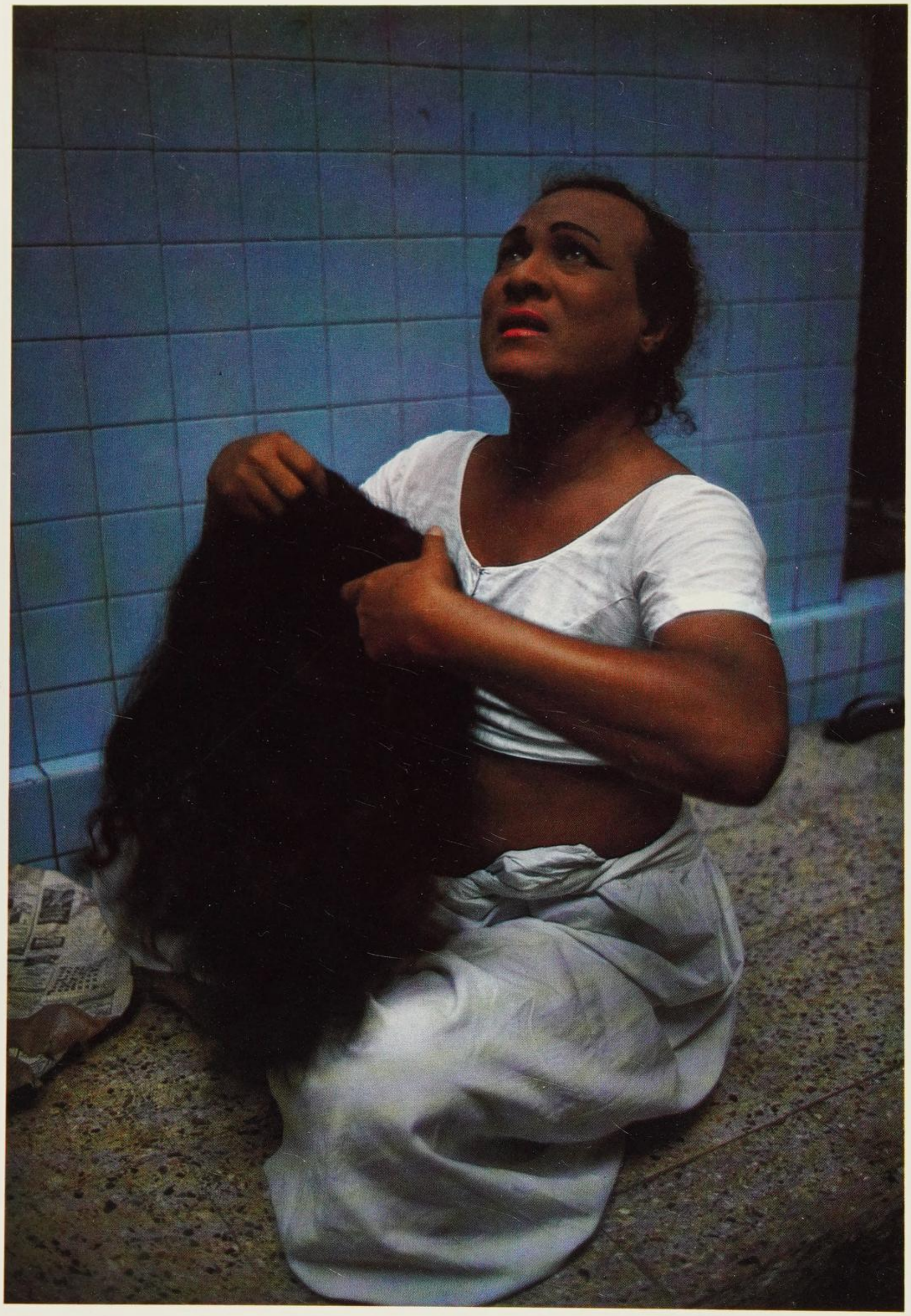
The prostitute is a transvestite.



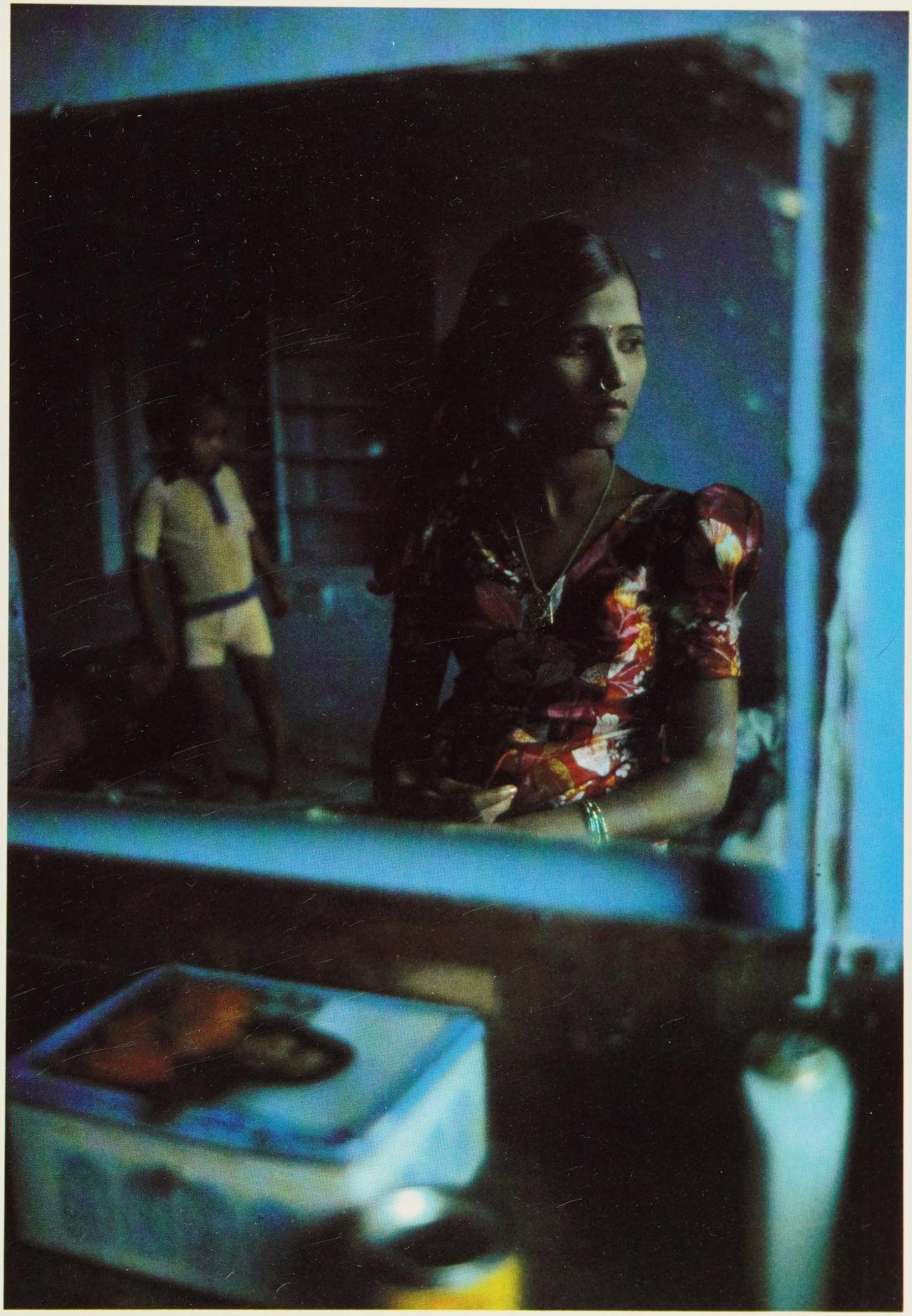
Asha with a customer. On the other side of the partition, one of the other girls dresses for the evening. The old woman seated on the floor is the mother of the madam. (The madam died of TB a few months after this photograph was taken, and her girls were separated and sold to other houses on the street.)

Kamla: "Often when I am with a customer, I hold my legs straight and he doesn't even enter me. After all, my body is my own."

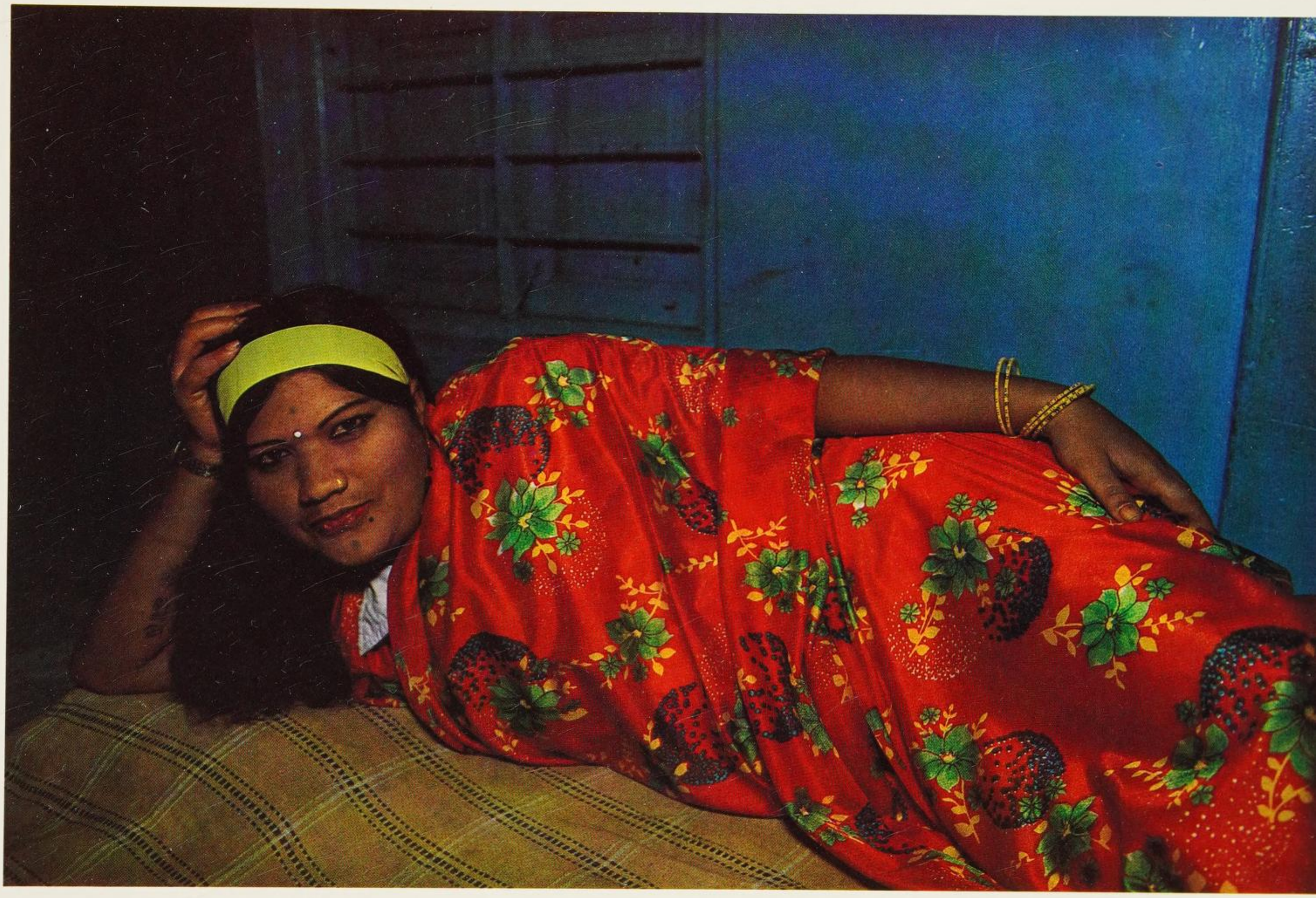
Asha (right) with her friend in a photo studio on Falkland Road.
"Mumtaz and I are best friends. We are sisters. We have
exchanged blood."



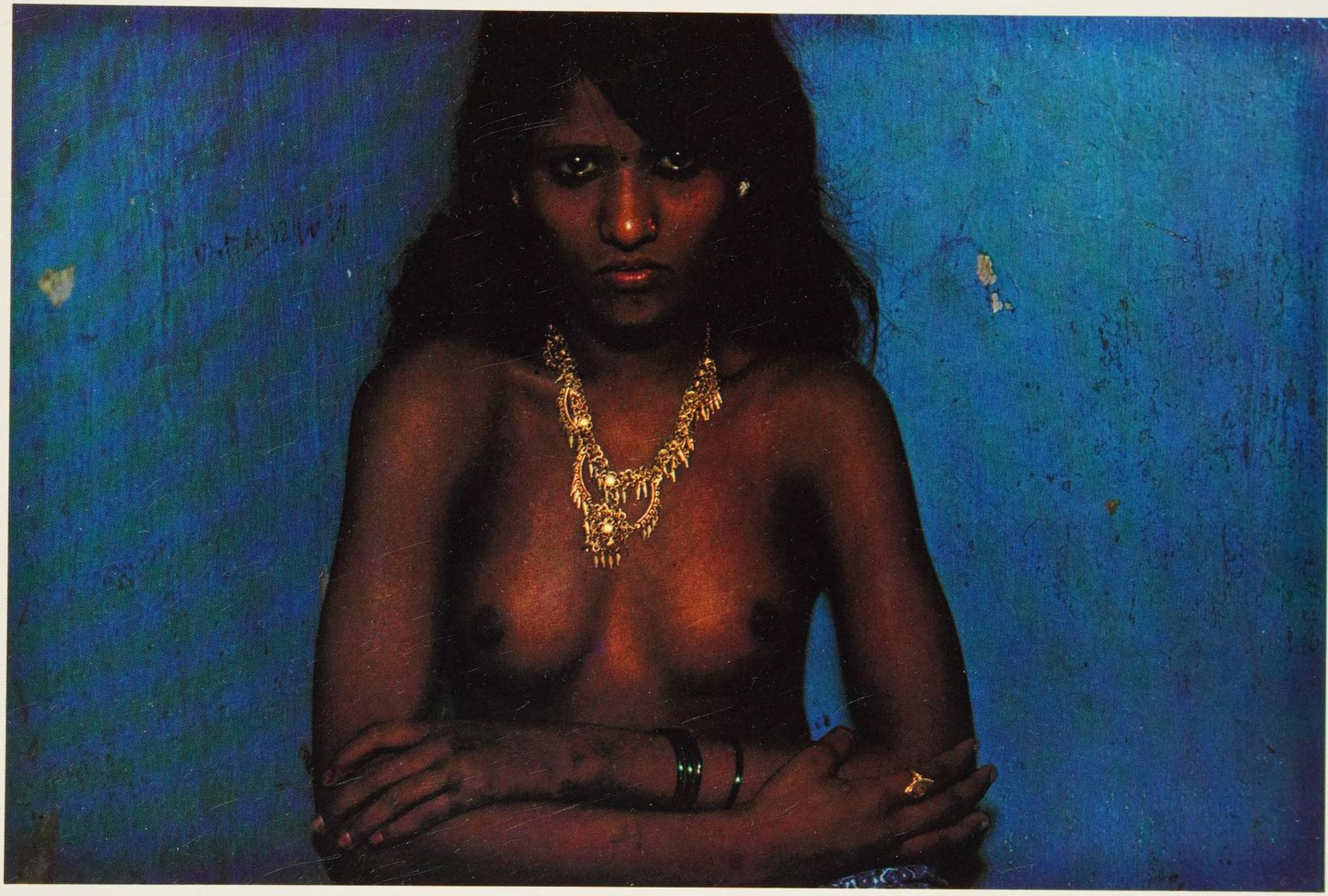
Ibrahim sometimes dresses as a man and sometimes as a woman. But when he goes to the mosque on Friday, it is always as a man.



Madam: "I don't like to take virgin girls. It is too dangerous. I can get in trouble with the law. It took me four months to break in Putla."

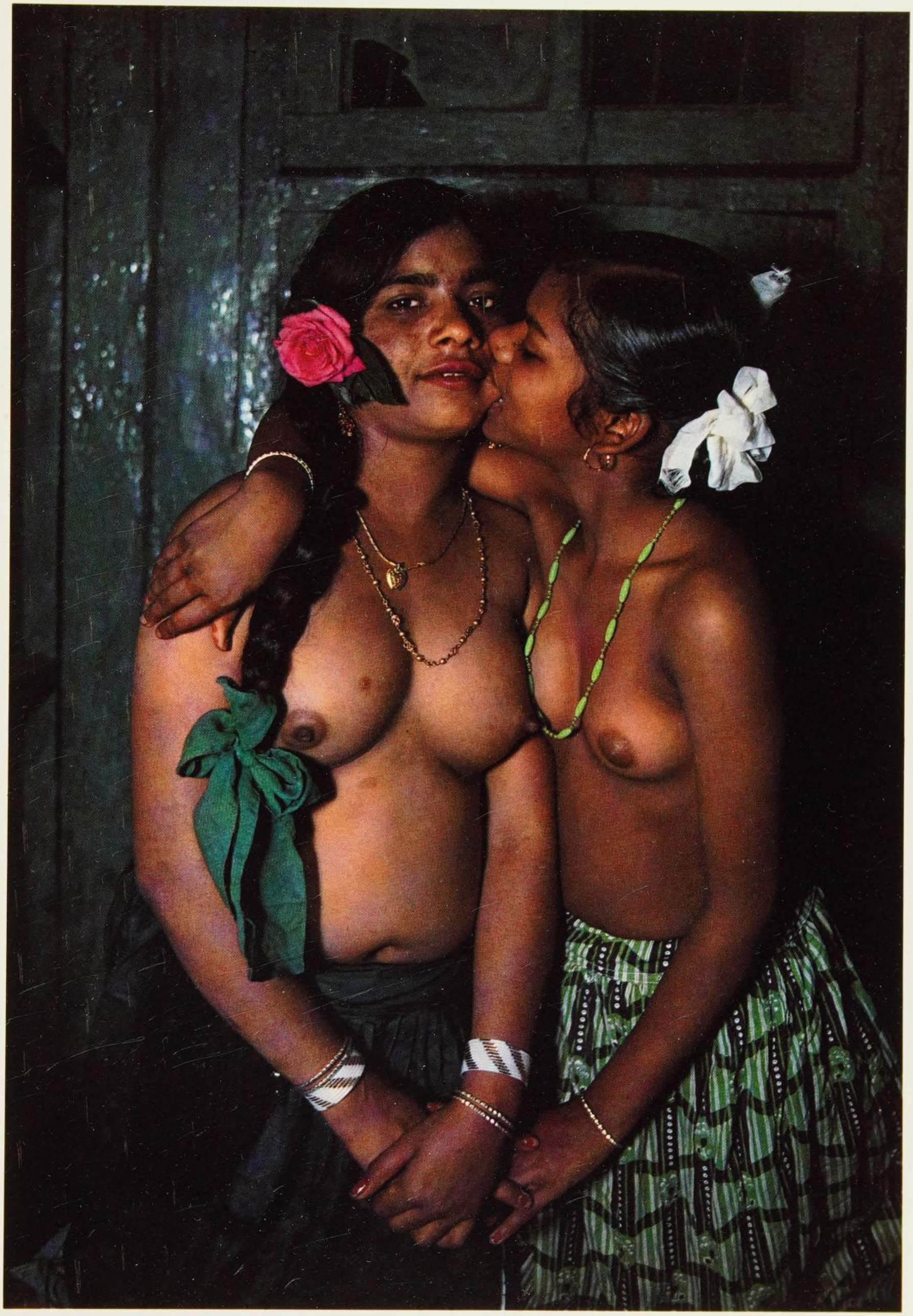


Kamla: "At thirteen I was kidnapped from my home in the village by an old woman, and she sold me to a madam. At first I cried and cried, but then I was forced to put on make-up and begin."



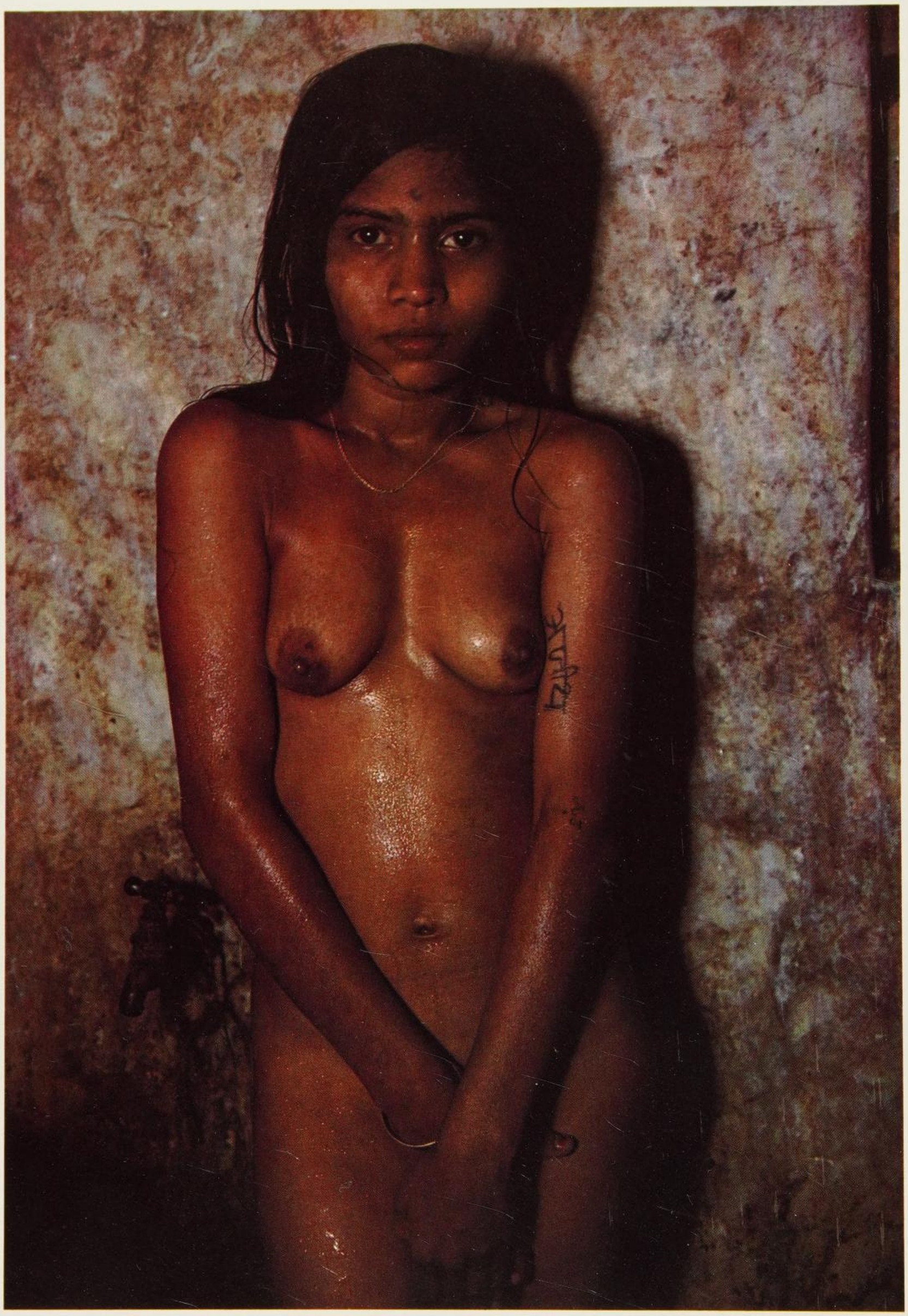
Putla, a thirteen-year-old prostitute, comes from a small village. She was sold to the brothel by her mother. *Madam*: "Putla's family is very poor. Her mother brought her here from the village last year. She was only twelve then. But her family needed money desperately. Her mother still comes to visit her every year."

Pulabai, a madam, with the baby of one of her girls in the brothel. The madam has named the baby "Miss Mary." The baby subsequently died when she was two months old of a high fever.



Lata (right) and Asha. They are friends, not lovers.

Champa, a transvestite, dressed as "an English lady."



Munni is fifteen years old. "I was begging in front of the Taj Mahal Hotel, when a foreigner bought me a red skirt, a shirt, and shoes and socks. The name tattooed on my arm is the only thing I can bring with me to my death."

A Note on the Type

The text of this book was set in Kennerley. Designed by Frederic W. Goudy in 1911, Kennerley has enjoyed great popularity. It is considered by many to be among Goudy's finest efforts.

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Typography by Holly McNeely

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